

blanket me in snow

Posted originally on the [Archive of Our Own](http://archiveofourown.org/works/37384963) at <http://archiveofourown.org/works/37384963>.

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| Rating: | Teen And Up Audiences |
| Archive Warning: | No Archive Warnings Apply |
| Category: | Gen |
| Fandom: | Dream SMP |
| Relationships: | Wilbur Soot & Technoblade & TommyInnit & Phil Watson , Jschlatt & TommyInnit (Video Blogging RPF) , Alexis Quackity & Karl Jacobs & Sapnap , Ranboo & Toby Smith Tubbo & TommyInnit , GeorgeNotFound & TommyInnit (Video Blogging RPF) , Alexis Quackity & TommyInnit |
| Characters: | TommyInnit (Video Blogging RPF) , Wilbur Soot , Technoblade (Video Blogging RPF) , Alexis Quackity , Sapnap (Video Blogging RPF) , Jschlatt (Video Blogging RPF) , Phil Watson (Video Blogging RPF) , Toby Smith Tubbo , Ranboo (Video Blogging RPF) , Rachel "Rae" Hofstetter , Minx JustAMinx (Video Blogging RPF) , Lizzie LDShadowLady (Video Blogging RPF) , Tina TinaKitten , Blair QTCinderella (Video Blogging RPF) , Imane Anys , just play spot the streamer tbh , You'll see , GeorgeNotFound (Video Blogging RPF) |
| Additional Tags: | Ice Skating , TommyInnit Needs a Hug (Video Blogging RPF) , this is the fic where he gets all the hugs actually , Protective Wilbur Soot , Wilbur Soot Loves TommyInnit , Toby Smith Tubbo & TommyInnit Friendship , Alternate Universe - Hockey , Fluff and Hurt/Comfort , TommyInnit is Bad at Feelings (Video Blogging RPF) , Protective Jschlatt (Video Blogging RPF) , Protective Technoblade (Video Blogging RPF) , Team as Family , Brotherly Affection , Alternate Universe - Olympics , obligatory dream is not the coach , the coach is just a guy |
| Language: | English |
| Series: | Part 2 of from ice to water |
| Collections: | Completed stories I've read , phoenix's mcyt fics <3 , and i will tell you that i love you again and again every day until you feel it to be true , Found family to make me feel something , wined and dined , absolutely amazing stunning 10/10 , Best Hurt/Comfort SBI Fics , Fics Spider Likes <33 , moth's fanfic recommendations , tommyinnit pipeline , fanfics that hurt me but i love them (authors should pay for my therapy) , Phil's the kind of a guy to look at the child and ask "Is anyone gonna adopt them?" and not wait for an answer , sbi fics <3 , mcyt related , The faves that keep the fanfic blood flowing , UltraRed's Favorites (mcyt) , Oneshots/not ghostobre's finished reads , alexs fav ffs :] (mostly crimeboys and sbi) , All kinds of SBI fics , Talented. Brilliant. Incredible. Amazing. Showstopping. Spectacular , Timeless Fanfictions , 030 , summer's favorite fics ♡ - ♡ - ♡ |
| Stats: | Published: 2022-03-02 Words: 20,649 Chapters: 1/1 |

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by [Drhair76](#), [plantform](#)

Summary

He straightens, prepared for them to talk about his programs and jumps and achievements. Prepared for them to make him even more of a myth. To put him up higher on the pedestal that he was chained to. "Yes. I am- Tommy the olympic figure skater."

"Tommy the figure skater who tried teaching Schlatt and made him fall on his ass?" Minx asks, eyes widening. "That Tommy?"

Tommy pauses, then- "Um-"

or, slowly, Tommy learns how to be more than just the gold medal winner that he was made to be

Notes

omg i was NOT expecting people to like the first fic as much as they did- seriously, oh lord, i still have to respond to all those comments :(the support was Wonderful to see!! anyways, this is a sequel, set loosely after the events of the first- at some points it does go back in time just to establish Tommy's relationship with his coach, but all of those instances are IN THE PAST. that coach is FUCKING GONEEEEE! EVERYONE CHEER!!

okay, now that that is out of the way, ENJOY <33

[The first fic, for context!](#)

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

You cannot heal your way to a world where negativity doesn't exist.

It always will.

You cannot heal your way into the most physically perfect version of yourself.

That's not who you were born and built to be.

You cannot heal your way out of every worry, issue, struggle, grief, sadness, or down day.

That's not the point of being alive.

The point of healing is not to return to a place where everything is perfect. Instead, it is to begin to develop the ability to respond to what's imperfect. You cannot heal your way out of being human, and you were never supposed to.

- Brianna West

"Let's all give a nice, warm welcome to Tommy, the world's youngest male Olympic figure skater!"

Tommy smiles and hopes it doesn't look as nervous as he feels. He hopes how fake it is doesn't show on camera. His coach, next to him, as always, clears his throat subtly, and Tommy makes it brighter. He lifts his chin. *Calm and happy*, he thinks. Show them calm and happy. Excited.

"Wow, what an honor to have you here- to have the chance to interview you. I- if you can't tell, I'm a huge fan. Really." The interviewer says, crossing one leg over the other. Tommy, try as he might, can't remember his name. He should remember- it's only polite, but he just can't think past the fear in his chest.

Tommy nods once. "Thank you."

"And-" the interviewer gestures to Tommy's left. "-to have your coach here as well-"

Tommy's smile tightens.

"- what a blessing to have such an amazing skater and such an amazing coach here in front of me. Truly, what a pair. A dynamic duo, if you will."

Tommy's coach grins. "Well, if you say so, Mr. Frost-"

"Oh no, call me Ant, please."

His coach hates being interrupted, but he takes it all in stride. "Naturally. Ant, I have to be honest with you. To tell you the truth, some days it feels a lot like I'm doing most of the

dynamic duo-ing here.” And he laughs like the comment isn’t echoing around in Tommy’s head, making its way down to his heart.

“Really?” Then Ant finally turns to Tommy. “Tommy, are you any trouble in practice?”

Despite himself, Tommy startles at being addressed.

His coach swoops in, waving a hand, keeping Tommy quiet, drawing Ant’s attention once more. “Oh no, no. He’s very good when he listens. Trust me. No, and I guess I have to give credit where it’s due, when he performs, I walk away with a trophy. Isn’t that right, Tommy?”

There is Tommy’s cue to speak. “Yes.”

Ant doesn’t seem phased at all. “Oh yes, and the Olympics- why, they’re coming up quite quickly, yeah? Tell me, are you shooting for gold? Or do you have your sights somewhere else- this is your first run after all.”

Tommy’s eyes flicker over to his coach. The man nods. Tommy speaks. “Yes. I’m working towards gold. Nothing else is worth it.”

“We don’t bother looking lower than the best, Ant.” Coach fills in. “It’s how we win.”

“Oh, a champion’s mindset, for sure.” Ant nods like he understands. “And, pray tell, because everyone is just dying to know- what *is* your secret for churning out technical point after technical point from your skater? Your methods- kept well underwraps- are very, very effective- I’d say the process is almost *clinical* in nature. It’s astounding. Please, tell us about it.”

His coach gives a charming look at Ant and the camera. “Ah, well, Ant, my number one philosophy is to *never* let a skater have more than what they earn. This works because if they learn to *earn* good things in practice, then they’ll learn not to just expect good things out in competition. It squashes overconfidence. If everything is always a fight, then you learn that nothing is just *given* to you.” Then his coach looks at Tommy. “Isn’t that right, Tommy?”

Tommy swallows, then, entirely too aware of the camera, nods.

There’s a knock at Tommy’s door- not too loud, but quick and excited. Quackity. Thankfully Tubbo and Ranboo aren’t here right now or else they’d spring to the door before Tommy could get the chance too. Out of all of them, Tommy’s forty-five percent sure that Quackity is their favorite hockey player.

“Tommy! Tommy!” He calls cherrily. “*Tomas* ! Are you in here- oop-” Tommy pulls the door open, cutting Quackity off mid-sentence. “Oh. Tommy! Hey man!”

“Quackity, hi.” Tommy smiles a little. He can’t really help it- how could anyone not smile when looking at Quackity? “What’s- are you okay?”

“Oh yeah, oh yeah,” he waves Tommy’s concern away. Well, waves as best he can with his arms full of bags. Like, full of bags. They’re hanging off his arm like they do in the movies.

It's incredible- how he hasn't just fallen over yet makes no sense to Tommy. "Can I come in to put some of this down, man?"

Tommy steps aside, letting Quackity shuffle in sideways. He follows hesitantly, frowning when the man just dumps it all on Tommy's neatly made bed. One of the bags spill over and a bunch of colorful packages of candy fall out- so many that Tommy's never even heard of them.

"This is...a lot." Tommy remarks.

"Definitely. I did some shopping. Since we're on our last couple weeks here, I thought I'd take advantage of it- did you know that Alaska has the world's largest chocolate fountain? I sure didn't. I do now though. I'll have to take you sometime."

"That's cool. Um- are these all for Sapnap?"

Quackity wrinkles his nose. "Oh no, no way. No, he helped me buy most of this stuff. Tommy, you wouldn't believe how bad I am with directions. And- uh- regulating my purchases."

Tommy blinks. This is Quackity when he's being regulated? He's sure there are like, *three* different hoodies there. All themed with various animals and insanely fluffy.

"What's the occasion? Is this for your team? For your gold medal win?"

"Nope! Not for the gold medal and certainly not for my team!"

"...then...Ranboo and Tubbo?"

"Nope!" Quackity chirps.

Tommy frowns a little, stumped.

"This is for you, *mi tesoro*."

Tommy stares down at the bags piled on his bed. He feels thrown. "Wh- what?"

"I wanted to do something nice for you." He explains. "I'm not the best with my words like Wilbur, so I went out and got you some things I thought you might like! There's all types of candy, so you can try them all and figure out which one you like- there's a quilt I think, cause I saw it and thought it looked fuzzy- um, oh! I got you some socks. They have raccoons on them, cause you seem like a raccoon kinda guy. There are types of stuff."

"But- you-... why?" He whispers, shocked. "Why would you do this- that's so much- I haven't- I don't have anything to give you?"

"Tommy, I'm not giving this to you because I want you to owe me. I'm doing this because I love you, man. this is just how I show it best." He pauses, swallowing, his eyes flickering down at the bags. "I'm not- I didn't have a lot of friends before this team, but I've always wanted to be the kind of person who makes people happy with gifts. They- *esos idiotas* - let

me do that. I mean, who do you think bought Sapnap that red and black hoodie he wears everywhere? and Wilbur those walrus themed shoelaces that he never fucking ties? I mean, if you truly don't like the gifts, I can take them back, Tommy, really, but don't not take them just because you can't give me something back. This is my love. It's not something you have to earn."

Tommy...doubts that. He does. But the thing about Quackity is that he never says things that he doesn't mean- Tommy knows that for a fact- so what does he believe? "Oh. I see." He says, even though he doesn't. "Thank you, then. I really appreciate it."

Quackity grins. "Go on, go go. Open the first one. If you don't like them I'm taking them back and getting you all new ones, so-"

And so that's what he does. Tommy sits there with Quackity and opens bag after bag of cool things- hoodies and sweets and cheesy souvenir knick-knacks that make Tommy smile to himself. There's so much and he loves it all, and he has to be honest- Quackity was right, the blanket is extremely soft and so nice to pull around his shoulders and hide in.

"Quackity, this is-"

"Yeah?"

Tommy, embarrassingly, finds himself sniffing, tearful. He can't stop brushing his hand over the blanket- back and forth, back and forth. "Are you sure I can't do something for you?"

"I'm sure that you don't need to." He answers steadily. Then he reaches out. Touches Tommy's cheek tenderly. "I do this for family, *tesoro*. And you're part of my family now- don't you dare for a second think that you're not."

Tommy takes a walk at some point- just to clear his head.

Usually he'd head down to the rink to do the same thing, just skate until he didn't have to think, but after competing, he's found it harder and harder to find a reason to tie up his skates. He has no coach, no events, no real *reason* to skate. There's no purpose. And besides, his last skate was magical. If that's truly his last one ever, then he wants to keep that experience untainted.

The problem with taking a walk- other than the fact that everyone knows who he is- a gold medal olympian with bright blond hair that has no idea how to hide away from the cameras- is that it's Alaska. So it's cold. Freezing, even. Of course, he's used to the cold, but after a while of walking in it, even *he* felt the chill that shoving his hands into his pockets couldn't keep back.

The walk back- including the time he spent waiting out the people looking to talk to him and take photos of him- just made him even colder. When he finally gets up to his shared room, he's so cold that he isn't even shaking anymore, and his cheeks hurt from the biting winter wind.

He opens the door with his keycard and walks in, stopping in the hallway when he sees Tubbo laying on the carpeted floor, eating one of the many bags of gummy worms that Quackity bought Tommy. He gave most of them to Tubbo, because there was no way Tommy would be able to eat all the candy alone. Ranboo, meanwhile, has his head in the closet, like he's looking for something.

"- it has an astronaut on the front, Tubbo. I know you know what I'm talking about."

"I don't keep track of your shit, Ranboo." Tubbo picks up a blue gummy bear and makes like he's about to launch it at Ranboo's back, but then he stops when he sees Tommy standing there. "Tommy!"

Ranboo startles, banging his head on the hanger bar and groaning. He recovers quickly and turns. "Tommy? Shoot- ow. Ow. Yikes. That was not cool."

Tommy carefully sits on the edge of his bed and takes off his shoes. "You alright, Ranboo? That looked like it hurt."

"Nope! It didn't." Tubbo and Tommy both look at him. "Alright, I'm lying," he admits, "but let me lie because the embarrassment is overtaking the pain. That's my superpower, I think."

"Ranboo, keep looking for your hoodie." Tubbo orders, waving Ranboo back to the closet. "Tommy, where have you been- I've been waiting to start the Princess Bride with you- you still want to watch it right?" He pauses, then frowns. "Wait- you haven't been on the rink have you?"

"No. I promise." He curls his hands into tiny balls, and winces when it hurts slightly. "I went for a walk."

"Yeah? You're so red-" Tubbo stands up and reaches over to touch Tommy's cheek. It's barely there for half a second before he's wincing and pulling back. "What the fuck, Tommy? You're freezing! How long were you out?"

"He's freezing?" Ranboo asks. Then realizes he can just ask Tommy. "You're freezing?"

"You're not looking for your hoodie, Ranboo," he reminds gently, even as Ranboo comes forward and touches Tommy's other cheek. Tommy, under both their hands, still doesn't tense.

"Jeez, Toms, you're freezing."

Tubbo rolls his eyes. "I *said* that."

"Sorry," Tommy says, tucking his hands under his arms.

"No, no, look- let's get you warm." Ranboo says.

And Tommy has no clue what that means, but apparently they do, because Tubbo immediately dashes off to the bathroom. Ranboo pulls away, turning and starting to pull

blankets together. And not just blankets, pillows and sheets and covers- as many as they have.

Tommy peels off his coat, looking over at the open bathroom door nervously. "Um- what are you guys doing?"

"We're getting you warm." Ranboo answers, like it's obvious. Tommy feels mortified.

"I'm okay, Ranboo, really. I promise I'm-"

"Don't let him lie!" Tubbo yells from the bathroom.

Ranboo looks at Tommy expectantly. Tommy flushes. "I'm not lying. The cold is fine. It's just- I don't know, I'm used to it, really."

"Yeah, but just because you're used to it doesn't mean you can't be uncomfortable with it, Tommy." Ranboo tsks. Even when he's disapproving, he's still gentle. "Look, we do this all the time after we come down from the mountain- let us do it for you, okay?"

Tubbo pokes his head out of the bathroom doorway. "Are you really gonna turn down my amazing bath? I ran the water just for you, dude. I'm also not above guilt tripping you. Feel guilty. Feel guilty and take my warm bath."

Tommy sighs, then he smiles to himself. "Okay. I will."

When Tubbo declares the bath finished, Tommy goes in, takes off the rest of his freezing clothing and sinks into it with a relieved sigh. It's very warm and soothing and somehow smells like lavender even though the soap offered in their bathroom was something generic and unscented. It warms Tommy all the way to the core, almost makes him doze off in the water. He manages not to, instead pulling himself out of the water when he can finally feel the tips of his fingers again.

He towels off and pulls on the clothes that Ranboo put out for him- he has to pause when he sees the hoodie that Ranboo was looking for, space alien embroidered right on the chest. Tommy swallows down the emotion welling in his throat and tugs it over his head. When he finally comes out of the bathroom, he feels deliciously loose and sleepy.

"Tommy, look! Blanket pile! Come lay in our blanket pile." Tubbo demands immediately.

Tommy hums, padding over and climbing into bed, sinking into all the warmth. Ranboo leans over, taking the blanket that Quackity bought him and laying it over his shoulders.

Tommy closes his eyes, sighing softly. "This is so nice?"

"Snowboarder special-" Ranboo nods, settling down next to him. "We know how to get cold but we also know how to warm up right after. Speaking of getting cold- wanna hear what Seapeekay did out on the slopes today?"

"Oh, it pissed me off." Tubbo exclaims. "No one is allowed to try tricks that I haven't learned yet. No one. I'm going to take that man's board and snap it in half."

“Didn’t you two already win gold?”

Ranboo chuckles. “Yeah, but we’re still filled with hate. Anyway, we get out onto the slopes right? And it’s like- seven in the morning- so we’re clearly trying to be the first ones there to get it all to ourselves, but guess what?”

“Hm?”

“Seapeekay is already there.”

“That bitch!” Tubbo huffs.

Tommy laughs lightly, sinking down into the blankets some more- settling back to let their story wash over him. He’s going to fall asleep halfway through when they get all technical about snowboarding terms that Tommy doesn’t know- half pipes and cork and things- and then they’ll have to put off watching *The Princess Bride* another time, but they wouldn’t be them if they didn’t get all caught up. Secretly, Tommy thinks that just hearing them talk could have made him warm- there’s just something about them that chases the cold away. Tommy has no clue what he’s done to deserve them.

Sometimes Tommy’s friends just do things that make no sense to him.

Like, for example, Wilbur will wear socks that don’t match just because he can, or Quackity will wake up early to be with the team but complain that he’s awake the whole time even though he *could’ve* just slept longer. They all have their own quirks and Tommy gets that, but most of the time if there’s something that Tommy doesn’t really understand, then it probably has to do with love.

Specifically with the way that they love him.

Quackity buys him gifts and always wants to pay for their meal and waves away anyone else trying to offer their wallet. Schlatt will just ask Tommy if he wants a hug, all the time, for no reason- of course, his answer is always yes, but Tommy still is awed by how endlessly he offers the love.

Sapnap, apparently, has a vendetta against Tommy’s hair.

Anytime Sapnap sees Tommy, he has to shove his hand into Tommy’s curls and ruffle them all up so they’re completely ruined. It makes no sense to Tommy, really, he’s never had the urge to do that to someone, but it makes him grin and it makes *Sapnap* grin, so Tommy thinks that it must have to do with love.

"I took these pictures when we had our games in Peru- that was a lot of fun. I remember Wilbur kept telling us all sorts of facts about the country like he was a tour guide." Quackity explains, swiping over on his phone, showing Tommy the photo of Wilbur on Schlatt’s back in the streets of Peru, both of them smiling excitedly.

"Oh," Tommy says, awed. "What’s that one?"

"We went to dinner together after a match. It was hard and we were so fucking tired, but Sapnap actually fell asleep at the table before the food even came. None of us could wake him up so we just let him sleep and took his food to go."

Sapnap appears out of nowhere, leaning over Quackity and squinting at the photo of him slumped over at the table. "Why are you telling him that, Q?" He reaches down and ruffles Tommy's hair, and Tommy on instinct, pushes up into the touch, pleased. Quackity smiles at them fondly. "He needs to think I'm cool."

"I do think you're cool, Sapnap."

"Not if this guy keeps showing you pictures of us. Wait until he pulls out his scrapbooks."

Tommy looks over at Quackity. "You scrapbook?"

"Yeah, I can teach you if you want. I take a lot of photos- mainly of them- so it's nice to have somewhere to put them all, you know? I like them organized very neatly."

Tommy pauses. "I don't...take a lot of photos. I've never had anything that I wanted to take a picture of."

Quackity and Sapnap exchange a look. "That's alright," Quackity says softly. "I've got tons of pictures from this trip. And you know what, maybe we could take some. you and me-"

"And me!" Sapnap nods. "And Wil and Tech and George. He hates photos but he'd take them if you asked, Tommy."

"You guys would do that for me? With me?" Tommy asks, they both nod. "But why? Wh- I haven't done anything to-"

"Earn it?" Quackity fills in sadly.

Sapnap sighs. "Think about it this way, Tommy, we didn't do anything to earn *you*. Does that mean we shouldn't still love you? I don't fucking think so. Sometimes you get to have nice things, not because you feel like you deserve them but because the people that love you feel like you deserve them. Does that make sense?"

"I think so." He answers hesitantly.

"Well, either way, we'll help you understand." Quackity promises. "And we'll help you with these photos. I'm going out, I'll get you some scrapbook stuff tomorrow. Want to come with?"

"Yes, please."

Quackity smiles and Sapnap reaches over and lightly tugs one of Tommy's curls. Tommy bats his hand away.

"I'm coming too. Just to make sure he doesn't buy the whole craft store for you." He informs, looking at Quackity pointedly.

Quackity looks offended. "I wouldn't."

"You would."

"Okay, are you telling me that you wouldn't?"

"I'm not rich, Q, and neither are you- you're just insane."

Tommy cuts in. "Please don't buy the whole store, Quackity. I can't take it home with me."

Quackity melts. "Okay, okay, if you say so Tommy. Let's go right now- let's go find George and bother him into being in our photos."

Tommy goes with him, of course, but not without Sapnap absolutely ruining his hair before he leaves.

The announcers for figure skating, Puffy and Sam, love to say that Tommy is a marvel. That he skates like he's never had any second thoughts that he can do it, like he's never been afraid of anything. They praise him for being the youngest person on the Olympic ice and not cowering to anyone else. He skates brave, they say.

Well, he's not brave.

He's afraid. He's afraid of everything.

He's never felt brave. He feels exposed constantly, and everything that he does is just him trying his best to cover and protect what could be easily hurt.

He's vulnerable. Brave is the last word he would use to describe himself.

"Try to- just stretch a little-" Tommy advises. Wilbur stretches. Wilbur falls on his face.

"Oh." Tommy pauses. "Well. No. Not like that."

"Just leave me here." Wilbur whines, laying out on the ice. "This is who I am now."

Tommy smiles, skates over to him. "Come on, Wil. Get up. You've got it."

He pulls Wilbur to his feet and skates back, letting the man adjust his balance on his own. Of course Wilbur is the one person who can convince Tommy to get back on the ice. *Let's have fun, Tommy-* Wilbur said- *just me and you on the ice. Teach me some more.*

How could Tommy say no?

Wilbur takes a breath. "I've got this. I do. I'm very good at sliding around on the ice with one foot."

“Mhm.” Tommy goes. He’s amused, maybe even fond. What can he say? Wilbur is amusing and Tommy is very fond of him.

Wilbur tries again, and then again, and then again. He falls on the ice more times than not and it makes Tommy turn his head and tuck his chin against his own shoulder in an attempt not to laugh. It's very funny to see him flop around on the ice, especially considering he's one of the most steady people that Tommy knows. And also, Tommy finds it fascinating- still, even after all this time- that Wilbur can just laugh at himself like it’s nothing.

He slips and his eyes go big and then when he's got his balance back, he snorts at himself and slips again. The rink, Tommy recognizes, is dead quiet whenever Wilbur isn't there. And Tommy would imagine that if he tried to come down and practice by himself, he wouldn't help hearing his coach in his ears. With Wilbur, the ice feels warm and the sound of melodic laughter deters any and all of Tommy's thoughts.

“I’ve got this one-” Wilbur moves like he’s going to try a jump, and doesn’t even make it off the ice before he’s falling forward. His pick must’ve gotten caught in a groove, and there he goes, yet another big spill of long limbs and brown curls.

And Tommy? Well, Tommy laughs.

He laughs- loud and unburdened, because he can't hold it back in time. Wilbur just looks so stupid laying there with his glasses askew and his hair all mused. It’s so hilarious that Tommy has to reach up with two hands and press them to his mouth, trying to keep the sounds he makes inside.

“Don’t laugh at me!” Wilbur groans playfully, and all of a sudden Tommy comes back to himself- realizing what he’s doing.

He’s laughing. Freely, loudly. Wild and unpolished. Out of control. His coach would think him awful. Tommy *feels* awful. All of his carefully learned control and it just takes Wilbur falling for him to break? He knows better. He *should* know better.

He cuts himself off, and turns abruptly, his cheeks so red that they're hot under his hands. “Sorry.” He says.

“Wait,” Wilbur goes, “wait, wait- I- I didn’t mean it, Tommy. I was just playing around, you’re alright to-”

“Do you need help getting up?” Tommy asks.

“No, I’m alright, I just-” Wilbur stands up again. Tommy purposefully ignores the confused, worried, almost wounded look in his eyes. “Are you okay, Tommy?”

“Yes,” he answers. His voice is carefully steady. He needs to control himself. He needs to be careful. He can't let them see too much of the parts of him that are unpolished because if they don't want him and his coach is gone? Who is left? “You should try again. I think you’ll get it this time.”

"Alright," Wilbur says hesitantly. "If I fall again, you have my permission to laugh as much as you want. I would too."

"Okay," Tommy nods.

Wilbur falls a couple more times. Tommy doesn't laugh.

"They're gonna love you, Tommy." Sapnap says for the fourth time in the last ten minutes. The three times before it did nothing to alleviate Tommy's anxiety and this one has the same effect- none. "I promise. Have I ever lied to you?"

George, who is walking a little bit behind them both, sighs. "You told him you were the best player on the team. So yes."

"Fuck off." Sapnap shoots back. Then he's back to being excitedly optimistic. "But no, they're my friends, man. They're gonna love you just as much as I do. Well, maybe not as much, but enough."

Tommy hesitates, still apprehensive. George notices and slows down to a stop. Even though he's behind them, Sapnap can tell George isn't keeping pace and also slows to a stop, turning confusedly. But George's eyes are on Tommy.

"Tommy. If you're uncomfortable, you can tell us. You don't have to just *do* what we want."

Sapnap looks stricken and that prompts Tommy to quickly reassure them both. "I know." He promises. "I know. I just- people don't...like me."

Sapnap's face screws up. "What do you mean, man? Who? I'm sure that everyone you've ever met loves you."

Tommy pauses, then delicately goes, "Not *everyone*."

George gives Sapnap a stern look. Tommy hasn't known him as long as Sapnap has, but he's pretty sure the look is *now I've got to clean up your mess- thanks idiot*.

When he turns back to Tommy, his expression is gentler. "Tommy. The people who matter like you. And, if they don't like you- probably because of whatever preconceived notion they have of you in their head- then that's on them. You did nothing to deserve that."

"But they will, I mean. Love you." Sapnap cuts in. George looks at him. "I mean. Come on."

"They will," George admits.

That makes Tommy smile a little. "Okay. I'm ready."

He lets Sapnap lead him over to a hallway and then down it, into a common room. All he really knows is that he's meeting some of Sapnap's friends, nothing else, so it's a complete surprise when he realizes there's a bunch of ladies strewn across the couches.

There's one girl sitting on the rug getting her hair braided. She's wearing a red sweatshirt and black sweatpants and her hair is light brown with highlights all over the other girl's lap. The girl with her hands in the thick locks is wearing light blue sweats with darker curls framing her pale face. There's a woman lying across the sofa, texting, with purple streaks falling out of her black hood. There's a girl with pink hair and another one with long black sleek hair sitting cross-legged on the ottoman with nail polishes all around them.

"Sapnap!" The girl in red shouts, sticking an arm up and waving. "Hey, what the hell!"

"Hey Rae-" Sapnap greets, grinning. "Poki."

Poki rolls her eyes. "Sapnap."

"Hey, what's with all the anger? I'm not even interrupting your practice this time."

"This time." Poki repeats.

The girl with the sleek black hair bounces up and hops over, throwing her arms around Sapnap. She's smiling so much that her eyes turn to little crescents.

"Sapnap!" She cheers.

"Tina!" He hugs her back and then pulls away, stepping to the side. "Tina, Tina, look-"

Tommy steps behind George a bit on instinct. Thankfully, she sees George and gets distracted. She bounces forward and similarly wraps George up in a hug, which is something that *no one* does. No one except for her, apparently.

"Hi Tina." George says fondly. She squeezes him tighter, looking over George's shoulder and finally noticing Tommy standing there nervously.

"And who's this?" She asks, letting George go. "Oh my- hello, I'm Tina."

"Hello," Tommy ducks his head slightly. "I'm- uh- I'm Tommy."

Tina's eyes go wide. "Wait. Tommy?"

The girl with the purple streaks coming out of her hood sits up abruptly. "Tommy? Like, Tommy the *figure skater* ? That Tommy?"

Tommy flinches. The figure skater- the figure skater. He's the figure skater. Gold medalist olympic figure skater- his coach's voice rings through his head: *carry yourself like a figure skater Tommy, you're not just you anymore.*

He straightens, prepared for them to talk about his programs and jumps and achievements. Prepared for them to make him even more of a myth. To put him up higher on the pedestal that he was chained to. "Yes. I am- Tommy the figure skater."

"Tommy the figure skater who tried teaching Schlatt and made him fall on his ass?" Minx asks, eyes widening. "That Tommy?"

Tommy pauses, then- "Um-"

Minx gets up and suddenly Tommy is looking down at her. She's got a huge grin on her face. "You, Tommy the figure skater, are super sick. I'm Minx and I think you should make him fall more."

The girl wearing red- Rae, he thinks- waves her arms. "Wait, I want to meet Tommy- Poki, get your hands out of my hair!"

"Rae, shush, I'm almost done. I'm not starting over after getting this far."

The pink haired girl with still wet nails leans back and forth in excitement- rocking almost. "Qt is gonna be sorry she missed this- she's been hearing so much about you from Wilbur. I mean, we all have- you're the only other person that we know that says he likes carrot cake as much as she does."

Tommy goes pink. "I do like carrot cake." He figured it out after he and Techno snuck down to get some late while everyone was still asleep.

"That you do." She laughs. It's a beautiful sound. "I'm Lizzie- that's Poki, Rae, Minx, clearly. Tina, and Qt, if you see her, is the one who is wearing the gold medal around her neck like it's jewelry."

"You guys are the girl's hockey team." Tommy realizes looking over at Sapnap, who's giving a secret thumbs up.

"The better hockey team." Rae says pointedly- and just in time too. Poki finishes the braid and the second she's loose, she's leaping up and coming closer. Sapnap puts an arm out, but she knocks it away and nearly tackles Tommy in a hug. Tommy stiffens. "It's very nice to finally meet you, Tommy."

Tommy relaxes. Oh.

"It's nice to meet you too." He says softly.

She pulls away, a new grin on her face. Tommy wonders if everything is this exciting with Rae. "Come sit with me and Poki and tell us all about how awful the boys are at figure skating."

"See Tommy? I told you that they'd like you." Sapnap boasts, too excited to even be mad about the diss thrown at his lack of skate skills.

Minx glares. "Why are you still here? We only want Tommy." Then she considers. "I guess George can stay too. But fuck you."

Tommy lets himself be pulled over to sit next to Poki. "Hello," he says shyly.

Poki smiles. "Nice to meet you. The boys do talk about you a lot- all good things, of course. Even if you make them fall on the ice."

That's how Tommy spends his afternoon- in the middle of the girls, listening to Minx's many, many embarrassing Schlatt stories, or Tina's embarrassing Sapnap stories- all of which he denies are true. Tommy even offers some of his own, and before he knows it, he's comfortable with them, talking to them like he's known them just as long as he's known the guys.

At one point, Minx actually full-on *cackles* at something he says and Tommy realizes, *huh, maybe meeting new people doesn't have to be as terrifying as it has been. Maybe he was lied to when he was told he was inherently dislikable.*

"Okay." Schlatt says suddenly, slamming his phone down onto the table. "We need to talk."

They've just finished lunch- subs and chips and all types of fruit juices that Tommy's never heard of. He's been having a great time listening to their discussion- which Marvel hero would they all be if they had to. Technoblade is apparently Thor, and when asked why Sapnap shrugged and said *older sibling syndrome*. Techno promised to ask Phil to make him do extra laps- only proving Sapnap's point.

But that conversation falters, and they all turn their attention to Schlatt, who looks properly distressed.

"Schlatt," Techno asks indulgently. "What is on your mind?"

"Did you see what they did to the Discord logo? Did you *see it*?"

"*Ay dios mio*, here we go again."

"Don't you dare *ay dios mio* me, Q." Schlatt huffs. "Have you *seen it*? It's awful. It's- you know, it's time I say something. It's time that I speak out against the logo issue that is facing us."

"You don't have to." George informs. "You really don't. Like, at all."

"No, I do. You know what? I'm standing up for this." Schlatt stands up. "Here I go- I'm standing."

"Oh goody." George says dryly. "He's standing."

Sapnap steals some doritos off his plate. Schlatt doesn't bother smacking him away, too busy standing. He claps once and Techno sighs heavily.

"This should be good." Wilbur hums, leaning back in his chair, crossing his arms over his chest to watch.

"Boys, we've got to save the world." He says seriously. "All our beloved logos are disappearing."

"Save the world? Seems a bit fucking much, don't you think?" Sapnap shoves the doritos in his mouth, crunching obnoxiously. George eyes him in disgust.

“Bees are disappearing, the ice caps are melting, and you think that the logos are why the world is ending?” Quackity asks. “Really?”

“Have you seen what they did to the Pringle guy? That alone probably threw the entire earth off kilter!”

“I had no clue Mr. Pringle was keeping the world upright.” Techno snorts.

“You talk too much-” Schlatt picks up his phone. “Tommy, look at this-” Schlatt thrusts his phone screen at Tommy’s face. Tommy blinks at it. It’s a pringle logo. “Now, look at this.” Again, another pringle logo- significantly different. Schlatt pulls the phone away. “Which one did you like better, Tommy?”

Tommy’s eyes widen. “Um- sorry?”

Schlatt softens just a tad. “Which one did you like better, kid? There’s no right or wrong answer- just go with your gut.”

“Oh. Um.” He thinks back to the logos. The first one was more familiar to him. He thinks that counts. “The ...first one?”

“Great choice. You’re smart as a whip, kid. See? Even Tommy agrees! All of our precious logos are being wiped out!”

“Precious?” Wilbur questions. “Dude, why are you so attached to the Pringle man? Next thing I’m gonna hear that you’ve made love to the Michelin man.”

“No comment.”

Wilbur spits. Techno sighs.

“This whole team is an embarrassment.” George announces. “Sit down Schlatt.”

Schlatt sits down but Tommy can’t stop watching him, awed. *Smart as a whip*, he said. *Tommy’s smart as a whip*.

Tommy hides his smile behind a hand.

"So, Tommy, the public needs to know a bit about you. Let's make you human to them, yeah?"

Tommy *hates* interviews. He's not made for them. He isn't made for the camera. He's not good at coming across as likeable or nice or anything if he isn't dancing. He doesn't know how people do them and how they don't feel like they're being judged for every little thing they do.

Make you human, he said. How can Tommy do that?

"What is your favorite food?"

Ah.

Tommy panics a bit. He doesn't *have* a favorite food. At least, he doesn't think so. He doesn't- what does his coach eat a lot? Does he know?

Outwardly, he tilts his head like he's considering. "Hm, I think- uh- fettuccine Alfredo?"

"Oh yes! Brilliant choice- a bit of pasta on your cheat day-" he leans in a little, "-don't worry, we all have them." He laughs lightly. Tommy smiles. "And what about animals, do you have a favorite animal?"

"I love swans." Honestly, he's never seen a swan- nor does he have an opinion on them either way. But he imagines they're nice. His coach likes them, so Tommy does too.

"Of course, of course." The interviewer nods. "A very beautiful, graceful and majestic creature. It would only make sense for you to love them. Hm, oh- what is your favorite color?"

Tommy hesitates, trying to think.

"Can I guess?" He asks and he sounds so excited that Tommy can only nod. "I would have to say blue, right? I mean- you wear a lot of pale blue. It must be your favorite."

Tommy *does* wear a lot of pale blue. And White. And grey. He wears what he's told to and his coach is fond of the color.

He's told that it's good to wear complimentary colors- things that bring out his features, eyes, hair, cheeks. Blue does that for him- it smoothes him out and makes him presentable. Showing him off when he walks by.

Tommy may not know what color he likes, but he sure knows which one he *hates*.

He laughs though, because contradicting people only leads to trouble. He tilts his head a little, curves his lips and pretends to be amused- silently of course, he shouldn't be too loud- he has to be careful about how much noise he makes and how much space he takes up. He's not here to be heard, not really. He's there to look good. Everything is about image.

He's Tommy- professional figure skater vying for olympic gold- his favorite animals are swans and his favorite color is pale blue. He laughs quietly and smiles instead of speaking. He's adored by the viewers.

He's terrified, but that isn't pretty, so he's brave. He's whatever they need him to be for as long as they'll have him, and he should be grateful for that.

Schlatt does this a lot, Tommy realizes. He just *talks*.

About a lot of stuff- video games and cars and the weather and logos and types of paper. He just talks about things that don't seem to have greater consequences. And he does it with so much *passion*. He says everything that he thinks even when the people around him don't

seem to agree or understand where he's going. He just doesn't *care* and Tommy finds it fascinating.

"Black cannot be your favorite color." He groans. "It just *can't*."

Quackity, grinning, probably lying just to rile him up, turns in a slow circle on the ice. "It can, man. I don't know why you won't let me live my life."

"Quackity, black is not a *color*."

Sapnap, busy tying up his laces, murmurs, "there's a joke there, I'm just not the right person to make it."

"Am I not allowed to like the darkness now?" Quackity argues. "I have to- what- like white or something?"

"That isn't a color either! They're both just various absences of color- two on either side of a spectrum. Sapnap, you like orange, yeah?"

"Sure-"

"So then you know-"

"I also love black and white." He finishes.

Quackity spins another lazy circle. "I can't love black and white? I have to be like everyone else? No way. I'm perfectly happy being special. I'm okay with being not like the other girls- I may be toxic, but I'm fucking free."

Tommy's been sitting quietly, watching, listening, but he hears that and thinks- *that's funny* . A smile cracks over his face, and he realizes that he wants to laugh. He feels it in his gut, genuine laughter.

He *could* just laugh the way he was taught- quiet and polite. Not grabbing any attention, but maybe he wants to test it. Maybe he wants to let himself be a little loud, a little uncontrolled. Just to see how they react, if for nothing else.

So he laughs- and it isn't *too* loud, or too long, but the point gets across. The sound travels across the ice and Quackity stops so still that he almost tips over, off balance. Tommy almost presses a hand to his mouth and apologizes, but then Schlatt grins like he just won something.

"Tommy," he goes, before Tommy can say sorry. "What is *your* favorite color? Do you have one?"

Tommy hesitates. The words pale blue are on his tongue.

"Say white just to piss him off." Sapnap whispers. "It would be funny."

And he probably would, but he's actually trying to think now- what *is* his favorite color? He likes sunrises when he wakes in the morning for practice- he likes the color of the ice before anyone skates on it- he likes the golden shine of trophies. He likes all of those, he *does*. His favorite though...he thinks about the things he likes the most. The hockey team, their raucous laughter and the chaos that's easy to melt into. Their jerseys, black and-

"Red," Tommy answers quietly. "I think that I like the color red."

Again comes Schlatt's gleaming, winning smile.

This is Tommy, Schlatt says when they introduce him to Pokimane and the girl's coaches, Corpse and Sykkuno. Tommy tenses, preparing for him to say Olympic figure skater, but he doesn't. *This is Tommy*, he grins, *who decided that his favorite color is red*.

From there, he tests it more and more often- thinking it somewhat of a game. He'll laugh, outloud, on purpose, at something one of them says- Quackity or Wilbur or even George's quiet comments- and nothing will happen. He isn't told off, he isn't given a look, he isn't told that he's being too much or too unruly.

They just- don't mind it.

It's very freeing to be able to enjoy things without policing yourself, Tommy realizes. He didn't know how tense he was until they started making him laugh.

And then Lizzie says something about it.

They're all hanging out- both of the hockey teams plus Tommy, who magically found himself in the middle of two loud, large groups who all seem to like him.

It's rowdy and wild, with Rae and Sapnap both arguing playfully, and Minx finding new and worse ways to insult Schlatt, and Pokimane explaining something to Quackity, trying to talk over all of them. There are jokes and quips and insults zinging around Tommy quicker than he can process, and he leans back against Techno and listens to them all, smiling contently.

When one really catches him off guard- Minx telling Schlatt that his facial hair looks like wet grass- he's startled into real, genuine laughter. It's so honest that his eyes squeeze shut for a moment.

Tommy doesn't keep count of how long he laughs because he doesn't need to do that anymore, but it's definitely been quite a bit, because when he's caught his breath, Lizzie leans over and whispers quietly to him.

"You don't see it, cause your eyes are closed, but when you laugh, they all stop."

Then she leans back over like nothing happened, like she didn't just leave Tommy reeling- completely startled and twisted up. He feels the way he feels when he misses a jump and goes falling, confused and disoriented.

They all stop. They all stop.

When he laughs, they all stop and look and *stare* and he doesn't see it because his eyes are closed.

He knew it was too good to be true. He *knew it*.

They hate his laugh- they're disgusted with it. In fact, they're *so* disgusted with it that it makes them stop what they're doing and look over. They must think that his happiness is such a nuisance that it is enough to put a stop to their day.

He should've known- he's not allowed to be loud. He never is and never was. And his laugh isn't fun or beautiful or worth anything- it's annoying. It's unpleasant. His coach tried to tell him. He *tried*. Tommy just never listens.

He doesn't laugh for the rest of the night.

He realizes, in his quest to keep his joy quiet, that his friends are really, really funny.

All of them- the hockey players from both teams, Tubbo and Ranboo- even Jack Manifold the skier, when Tommy gets the chance to talk to him. They're all so incredibly funny and witty and it takes almost all of Tommy to remember to stay somewhat silent when all he wants to do is laugh with them.

And worse than them just being funny, they actively *try* to make Tommy laugh, making jokes that Tommy can't ignore- jokes that are just his kind of humor. Wilbur even takes after Schlatt's lead and does a full ten minute rant about his least favorite animal, which for reasons that Tommy now knows too well, are anteaters. It was hilarious to watch and Tommy nearly forgot himself, stifling his own giggles as Wilbur paced back and forth in front of him.

He remembered suddenly when he saw Wilbur watching him, and pulled his happiness back, not wanting it to be seen.

He doesn't want to be hurt, but- he can't help how happy they all make him? How is he supposed to win?

"I don't feel good." Tommy says. It takes a lot for him to say it, but once it's out, he can't take it back.

George, who was scrolling on his phone, sitting there with Tommy in the comfortable quiet, looks over. "Okay. Do you want me to- get Techno? or- uh- Quackity?"

"No." Tommy winces. "Is that- is that okay?"

"Everything is okay, Tommy. If that's how you feel, then sure. You don't want to talk about it though, I imagine."

Tommy sits down next to George, pulling his legs in close. "How did you know?"

"You came to me. You could've gone to Wilbur or Quackity. But you came to me."

"I like you."

"I know." George says. He sounds pleased. "I like you too."

Tommy smiles.

There's a comfortable silence.

"I've been thinking about this new song for a routine- want to hear it?" Tommy asks, pulling out his phone. George nods and scoots closer, taking an earbud. It's nice to sit there in quiet companionship with George. He isn't trying to make Tommy laugh, or trying to monopolize his attention.

"Thank you." Tommy says after the fourth song or so.

"For what?"

"Helping me."

"I haven't done anything."

Tommy shrugs. "You were here. You didn't leave. You were- gentle. Thank you. Thank you for being gentle with me."

George seems thrown for a moment, but then he nods. "Always. Always, Tommy."

"I have a question." Tommy says.

"Yeah?"

"I'm not- I mean...I don't-" He sighs, frustrated with himself. "Am I annoying?"

George sits up and looks Tommy dead on. "I'm *sorry*?"

"Am I annoying? Do I annoy you?"

"Why would you think that you annoy me?"

"I'm loud."

George pauses. He looks cautiously incredulous. "You're... *loud* ."

Tommy nods.

George opens his mouth. Closes it. Opens it again. "You think that you're loud."

He nods again.

George thinks for a moment, then leans forward. "Tommy, you are not annoying. You are not irritating. You are not disruptive or a nuisance. I don't know why- well, I guess I do know why you would think that- but it isn't true. It could never be true."

"How so?"

"Because you could never annoy the people who love you by just being yourself."

Tommy tries to believe George. He does. He tries to believe that they'll love him for all that he is, not who he's pretending to be, but it's hard.

He spent so long being told who he was wasn't enough- how could anything else be true?

But they've taught him that wanting things is good. That wanting to be *happy* is good. That he shouldn't, and doesn't, have to earn it. So he sits in between them at lunch, watching and biting his lip, trying not to laugh, unable to stop the joy that they give him. And they're not stupid so-

"Look at how red Tommy is!" Quackity exclaims. "Come on, man, you know that was good! Give me a laugh, just a bit huh? I feel like I earned that reward."

That makes Tommy stop. *Reward* ? He's- Quackity thinks that-

Wilbur scoffs. "No, no, no. No, Tommy, your laugh is worth more than that- come on now, don't discredit it like that, Quackity. That was *weak*. Tommy, listen to *my* joke instead, here goes-"

And he keeps talking, but Tommy can't hear him, thinking over and over- *worth more*? His laugh is worth more?

"Shut up Soot." Schlatt reaches across the table and tugs Wilbur's beanie over his eyes, making him stop. "We all know the kid thinks I'm the funniest ever. What was the score? I won three Tommy laughs the past month. *Three* . Record holder. I've got a gold medal in comedy."

That's what throws Tommy the most he thinks. He's been taught that gold medals are the most valuable thing- they're worth working to the bone for. Having his laugh be held up to standard with one is- it's *indescribable* .

He manages- *somehow*- to open his mouth. "Tommy laughs?"

Schlatt stops. "Shit."

"Good going wise guy," Sapnap reaches over and smacks his shoulder. "Now our game is over."

Tommy's heart, which was rising, begins to fall. He thinks of folded pieces of paper and t-charts and bets. "Game? You-"

Of course, Schlatt immediately knows where his brain goes. "No! No, no, fuck- uh- listen, we- I'm not- Soot. Go. Explain. Now."

Wilbur sighs. "Tommy, your laugh is amazing. We- uh, not to be cheesy or anything- but we cherish it. Hearing it. Um- so we made a little game of who can make you laugh more. Just so we can hear it more often."

Oh.

"You- you *like* my laugh?"

Quackity's brows furrow. "You *don't* ? It's very-"

"Quiet." Tommy fills in.

"Not your real laugh." George says knowingly. "Your real laugh is loud-" Tommy winces "- and beautiful."

"We love it. We do. We wish- we wish you didn't hide it." Wilbur says. "We hope you understand that you don't *have* to hide it."

"Oh. Oh. Thank you."

Sapnap waves his hand. "No need to thank us, Tommy. Just keep letting us make you laugh." Then he leans in. "And laugh at my jokes the most."

Tommy makes no promises to Sapnap- laugh more though, maybe he can do that.

"Techno?"

"Yeah, Tommy?"

"Remember before when you said that I wasn't weak for feeling tired and hungry and things like that?"

"Yeah." Techno nods. He frowns a little, looking Tommy over. "What's wrong?"

"And you said having good friends isn't something that gets in the way."

"That's true."

"Tech, how do you keep yourself from getting hurt?"

Techno stops, stunned, "What?"

"How do I care and not get hurt by it?"

"What do you mean?"

"I'm attached. I'm- aren't I vulnerable because of it?"

Techno sighs, leaning his head back, finally understanding. “Ah. You know, I feel that all the time.”

“You do?” Tommy asks.

“I do. You want to know who I feel that way about?”

Tommy nods.

“I feel that way when Schlatt gets himself into trouble and I've got to go bail him out of it. I feel that way when I can't find Sapnap in time for our scrimmages and I go looking for him and find him with the luge players. I feel that way about Quackity when he falls asleep on every car ride we've ever been on- even the ones that are just a few minutes long. I feel that way about George when he gives me bruises that I have to ice for days. I feel that way about Wilbur, always. And you.”

“Me?”

“You, yeah. always, just like Wilbur- just like all of them, honestly- but especially when you're upset. It hurts me when you're hurt. In that sense, I guess I am vulnerable to you, Tommy. I'm vulnerable to you the same way that you're vulnerable to me. But neither of us are going to hurt one another on purpose. That's love. It requires trust.”

“Oh.”

“I know that it's hard, but the thing that you're missing is trust. You have to trust us not to hurt you in a way that we can't heal. And Tommy, we wouldn't. You know? We wouldn't.”

Tommy nods, wanting to believe him. He hopes that one day he can.

“Just- come to me-” Tommy says, holding his hands out. “Just come to me.”

“If I let go of this, I'm going to die.” Tubbo hisses. “I'll die, Tommy, is that what you want?”

Ranboo skates by gracefully, turning in circles around Tommy. He's surprisingly good on ice. “This is why you should've spent your time learning to skate rather than mountain climbing.”

“Okay, Ranboo.” Tubbo holds the rink edge tighter. “I can't wait for you to find yourself in a life or death situation on a pond of ice where *ice skates* will save you.”

Ranboo stops. “Um. Do you plan to get caught up in a mountain range slide at any point soon?”

“It could happen!”

Wilbur drifts by behind them. “Tommy! Look at me!”

Tommy turns and watches Wilbur completely bomb a single salcow. Off to his left, Schlatt cackles meanly and then slips and falls on his ass.

George sighs. “At least Wilbur is trying. Why can't you even stand on the ice? You skate professionally.”

Schlatt thumps his head back on the ice. Just to rub it in, George does a perfect single salcow and looks over at Tommy for approval.

“Good job George!”

George smiles, says thank you, and then turns and quirks an eyebrow at Schlatt. Schlatt flips him a finger. Quackity speeds by, spraying them both with ice, and then does a perfect bunny hop before nearly crashing into Wilbur.

“Tommy, you expect me to trust you when you taught *them*?” Tubbo asks. “I think you made them worse!”

“I didn't do that.” Tommy raises his hands. “Promise. Come here, Tubs.”

Tubbo blinks. Ranboo makes a face of surprise. As he goes by again, Tommy sees him mouth *Tubs* at Tubbo and flashes a quick thumbs up.

Tommy doesn't expect that to work, but suddenly Tubbo is pushing off the wall and sliding over to Tommy, wobbling wildly. Tommy catches him when he gets close enough, curling his hands around his wrists and helping him get back his balance.

“Tommy- I'm- Tommy, Tommy? I'm sliding.”

“Mm- that's what we want.” Tommy reassures. “Take a breath? I'm right here.”

Tubbo takes a breath. He holds on tighter. “Don't let me fall.”

“I won't. I won't. Just let me guide you? Relax.”

“I'm relaxed.”

Sapnap steps on the ice and George immediately rushes at him, tackling him against the sidewall. Tubbo's eyes blow wide.

“I lied. I'm not relaxed. I am no longer relaxed.”

“Okay, okay. Look at me. Look at me, not them.”

“They're killing each other.” Tubbo argues.

“They do that. They're harmless.” Tommy re-adjusts his hold on Tubbo's hands. “I'm gonna move backwards- come with me, yeah?”

Tubbo nods jerkily, and Tommy slides backwards slowly, pulling Tubbo with him. He's far too stiff, but Tommy rocks back and forth, and the soothing motion makes him unclench carefully. Soon, he's slowly skating up the side of the rink with barely any of Tommy's momentum.

“I’m gonna let go now, okay? But if you keep up that rhythm, you’ll be alright.”

“Okay, okay, I’ve got this.”

Tommy lets go and slides to the side, letting Tubbo pass him. He follows behind at a distance, ready to help if he falls or gets stuck, but Tubbo must remember that he’s *Tubbo* because he only speeds up, going around the rink with a sudden confidence that makes Tommy smile.

“Yeah Tubbo!” Ranboo cheers. “Woo hoo!”

A feral grin curves over Tubbo’s face and Tommy realizes he’s heading straight for Technoblade, who was just spinning in casual circles on the ice, unprepared. He has no clue that Tubbo is building speed to come and take him down.

“Technoblade!” Tubbo shouts.

Techno turns just in time for Tubbo to slam into him with full force and knock him down. He doesn’t look hurt, thankfully, he’s just shocked, and Tubbo also spins out the other way, laughing loudly. Techno does bump into Sapnap and George, who are still pushing each other around, who both knock into Quackity, who doesn’t fall but wobbles and uses Schlatt- who is just getting up, as a steady source, making Schlatt fall yet again.

“I knew we should’ve just left Tubbo on the mountains.” Ranboo sighs. “He’s gonna kill us all.”

Tommy can’t help it, he laughs so hard that he cries. Wild and free and unburdened and so deliciously happy that he nearly swoons. When he opens his eyes, vision blurry from happy tears, they’re all looking. He waits for the shame- it never comes.

Tubbo, sitting on the ice, raises his arms in a cheer, victorious. “I win!”

Tommy would have to agree. Tubbo definitely won that round.

Tommy shares a lot of hotel rooms with his coach. They travel a lot- just the two of them- because Tommy doesn’t have teammates or any assistant coaches. It’s just the two of them always.

For the most part, it’s not so bad. Around night-time is when his coach is the most lax about things- not reprimanding Tommy’s every move, too tired to even pay him any attention. They’d settle down for the night, with Tommy waiting for him to get ready before he starts, shuffling around the room quietly- folding his clothes and drying his hair from his shower. When he comes out, the light is already off and Tommy has to find his way to bed himself.

He’s exhausted when he finally gets there- but when he actually slips under the hotel covers, he can’t bring himself to sleep. He lays there, eyes open, hands clenched in the covers, just breathing. His coach is sleeping soundly on the other bed, Tommy knows he can hear the man snoring, but Tommy can’t bring himself to relax even the slightest bit. Something is stopping him.

Fear, he realizes, after the first ten minutes go by.

His eyes burn. His hands shake. He wants so badly to sleep, but he can't slow his own heart down long enough to let himself. He feels unsafe. He feels terrified. And the worst part is he has no clue why.

He's vulnerable when he's asleep is what he determines, as he catches short bursts of anxiety ridden slumber through the night. He can't sleep when there are people beside him. He can't- he has no clue what they'd think or how they'd react to seeing him. He can't control the way he acts when he's asleep, and so he can't keep himself in check.

It's people being near him that make him wary, Tommy decides. It has to be. There's no other option.

Quackity is very interesting to Tommy.

For a multitude of reasons actually. The man is overflowing with love, and is so completely unafraid to feel and let people see it. He's kind to everyone he meets, even people who have been known to be unkind to him, and he's so willing to give himself over to others- generous to a fault.

Other than that, he's also one of the most *expressive* people Tommy knows- talking with his hands and raising and lowering his volume to make people move out of his way. Tommy sees him and wonders what it must be like to not worry if what you want to say has any value. Tommy sees him and wonders if he'll ever be that expressive without the fear.

"I bet you wanna know what I told him, huh? I bet you're dying to know." Quackity bounces a bit on his toes. Tommy shivers a bit, and nods. He does- he loves all the stories Quackity tells. The real ones and the fake ones.

"Well, listen closely, I'll-" Quackity swings his hand and it brushes Tommy's. He stops short. "Wha- oh! Tommy, your hands- what the heck? They're freezing."

Tommy jerks back, mortified. "Oh- sorry, I just-"

"Why didn't you say something?" Quackity asks.

"Say something?"

"Yeah," he says, speaking like it's obvious, "so I could help you!"

"Help me? How? I'm just cold."

"Like this-" Quackity reaches over and grabs Tommy's hand. Securing his cold fingers in between Quackity warm palms. "There you go. Now we keep it there until it's warmer. It's what I do with Sapnap anyway."

Tommy feels stunned.

Quackity tugs a little, pulling Tommy along. "Anyway, as I was saying- I gave him the good old rough and tumble. I told him *if you're gonna mess with our team, then you gotta go through me*, you know? Really cliché type alpha man cryptocurrency nonsense."

"Oh?"

"Oh yeah, oh yeah. He didn't like that shit but he was scared of me, man. Listen, I'm no fighter, but here's the thing- no one *knows* that. You gotta use that to your advantage when you can. Growl at them if you have to."

"Like a dog?"

"Or hiss. You know I love cats here. I don't discriminate."

Tommy laughs softly. "Can I chirp, Q?"

"Well," Quackity grins. "Who am I to stop a man from chirping? Birds win battles, Tommy. Take it from me. I'm short but I'm no pushover."

"You're big. Big Q."

Quackity laughs loudly. "Yeah. Big Q. That's me. I'm huge."

Tommy hums in agreement and squeezes Quackity's hand. Quackity squeezes back.

"Tell me another?" He asks.

Quackity does.

Schlatt finds Tommy's old bear one day.

He's just absently picking through Tommy's closet, trying to find some clothing that isn't gray, black, or blue, when the bear, small and squished from being shoved away, tumbles out from deep inside. Tommy, sitting cross legged on the floor, watching, is frozen, stuck feeling ill as Schlatt bends down to pick it up. Everything is suddenly in slow motion and Tommy can't do anything but watch helplessly.

"What's this? Where in the-" He peers into the closet, bewildered. "Shit just fell out the damn wall, what the fuck?"

Tommy wants to throw up. He can't stop looking at the bear in Schlatt's hand. His bear. What does he do? How does he convince Schlatt to let him keep it?

Schlatt looks over. He sees Tommy's face. Something like understanding crosses over his expression, and he looks back down at the bear in consideration.

Tommy spends a lot of time away from his parents. You have to do that in order to become a professional athlete. You travel the world to play and you travel the world to practice and you only come back home when you're done. Tommy is never done.

He was homesick, in all honesty.

He missed being hugged by people who loved him. He missed being comforted at all.

He bought himself a bear when his coach wasn't looking. One of those airport teddy bears that are too expensive for no reason, but it was small enough to hide in his bag and was maybe the one thing he owned for a while that was just his. No one knew about it, no one told him off for it. It was the one thing he could curl around when he wanted to be held. Maybe it's childish and stupid and he has no idea what he was thinking trying to hide it but-

He needs it. He *needs* it.

"Please don't take it." Tommy blurts.

Schlatt stares at him.

"Sorry." He stutters. "Sorry, I just- can I..." *Keep it*, he wants to beg. *Can I please keep it? Can I please have this one thing just for me?*

Schlatt stares some more, his expression unreadable to Tommy. Then he turns to the bear, and fear grows in Tommy's gut, suddenly thinking of all the things his coach took from him and made him throw away because it only made him weaker, and he was supposed to be strong. Schlatt said before that Tommy was the strongest person that he knew, but Tommy, selfishly maybe, doesn't want to be strong. Tommy wants comfort. Any that he can get.

Tommy is tense, but Schlatt doesn't curl his fist tight around the bear. He just slowly, carefully, puts it back inside of the closet where he fell out from. He's quiet the whole time, not speaking, and he moves his body so Tommy can see all of what he's doing. The second that the bear is back out of sight, Tommy feels like he can breathe again.

"There," Schlatt says, uncharacteristically serious. "It's alright. I promise."

Tommy takes another breath.

"Now," he says loudly, pushing on like nothing happened. He pulls a baby-blue sweater out of the closet. "Let's ban the color blue, huh? I mean, what's it good for anyway? Doesn't do shit for me-"

Sapnap is very clingy.

Not that Tommy is complaining- he's never had someone want to be so close and want to hold him so much other than the team. It's actually really, really nice.

But Sapnap is *really* clingy. Impressively so.

When they walk side by side, unlike where Quackity or Techno would hold his hand, Sapnap just throws his arm over Tommy's shoulders and drags him close to his side. He makes way for the both of them, making people go around them when they're in the way.

Tommy likes it there. Under Sapnap's arm. He feels safe there.

"Tommy."

Tommy looks up, and Sapnap, who he'd been sitting with as he went through the team's hockey film, has paused the video and is looking at Tommy.

"Sapnap?"

Sapnap crawls closer, and then wraps his arms around Tommy, squeezing. Tommy stiffens, then realizes he doesn't need to and relaxes.

"Hi?" Tommy goes.

"Hello, just wanted to hug you." He sighs, like holding Tommy makes him happy. And Tommy can't complain because the touch is very warm and it still feels very, very nice to be held. Nice and new.

"I didn't get a lot of hugs." He says suddenly. He feels like being honest. "Back before."

Sapnap's hold tightens. "Fucking- yeah, kid. Yeah, I know. I'm sorry."

"I didn't. But now you all hug me all the time."

"You're very huggable." Sapnap says matter-of-factly. "Loveable."

"Really?"

"Kid, you don't know how easy it is to love you. I'll see you sitting there and want to give you a hug. Like now. That literally just happened."

"Oh." Then, "I love you too."

Sapnap presses his face into Tommy's side, humming happily. "I'm not watching any more film. We're chilling for the day. Techno can be mad at me later."

He wouldn't, and Tommy knows it, but he still pokes at Sapnap's arm. "I want to see the hockey."

"Oh God. I have to let go of you to get the remote?" He sounds scandalized. "This world is so evil and cruel."

Tommy giggles. Then he, cautiously, pokes Sapnap again. And again. And keeps poking. Sapnap doesn't get upset, in fact, all he does is pull his face away from Tommy's side and look at him, his expression melted like warm chocolate.

"Go, go, go." He insists, poking. "Hockey."

Sapnap sighs loudly. "Oh, Alright. For you." He goes to get the remote and hooks his computer up to the TV so they don't have to move to watch it. Tommy realizes he does feel

colder without Sapnap wrapped around him, but it's okay because the second Sapnap is back, it's all better.

"Hockey time." Sapnap say, curling his arm around Tommy's shoulders.

Tommy settles back, comfortable. "Hockey time."

There's a knock on his door, and since Ranboo is in the shower and Tubbo already headed down to find Niki before she takes them all hiking, Tommy goes to answer the door.

It's Schlatt. He's holding a bag and is doing his very best to look completely unbothered. "I have something for you." He announces. Tommy frowns a little. "Here," He says, thrusting the bag at him. "Take this."

Tommy blinks at the offering. Gingerly, he reaches out and takes it. His eyes flicker up at Schlatt before opening the bag. Inside, past the red tissue paper, is a turtle- tiny and brown and soft. Just big enough that Tommy can tuck it into his bag and cup it in both palms.

When he pulls it out, he holds it carefully, as lightly as he can and turns it over, looking at it like it's not real. "Is this for me? Really?"

"Yeah," Schlatt rubs the back of his neck awkwardly. "I saw it and thought you'd like it. This way, you've got one straight from me and you know nobody will ever take it from you. Or else."

Tommy doesn't look up. He can feel his cheeks color and he can't help his smile- not even small, one that keeps growing and growing until his cheeks are stretched and his eyes squint.

"Thank you," he says, holding it close to his chest, and finally looking up through wet, shining eyes. "Thank you."

"Of course, kid." Schlatt nods. Then he starts shifting a little, jerky and fidgety like he wants to move but is stopping himself. He looks like he wants to speak, but isn't.

It reminds Tommy of something- he knows what he's seeing. Just a few days after Tommy's medal ceremony, Schlatt came to Tommy's door looking restless and filled with nervous energy.

("Is everything okay?" Tommy asked, watching Schlatt shift like he was in real pain.

"Yes, I was- I'm fucking- like, okay, can I just-" Schlatt huffed loudly, blowing out a huge breath. "Can I give you a hug or something?"

"For what?"

"Give me a hug, I don't know. Just for living- come on, come on."

Tommy stepped forward slowly, not because he was scared, but because Schlatt was genuinely acting weird, but he still slowly looped his arms around Schlatt's neck. Immediately, Schlatt wrapped his arms around Tommy's back.

Tommy very vividly remembers hearing him exhale, like he was relieved. Tommy didn't know what was going on, but the hug was so nice and firm, plus the fact that Tommy didn't have to do anything to get it, made him want to sob.)

Apparently, he'd been waiting for Tommy's go ahead- asking Wilbur and Techno how he was, how he was doing, just waiting to be able to be as physically affectionate as he is with everyone else he loves.

Schlatt waited- they *all* waited, giving him time to get as comfortable as possible, making sure that he wouldn't be upset by their affection. Techno explained it best, saying that their instant gratification would never be worth any of Tommy's fear. Which is completely different to everything Tommy's ever been taught.

Even now, Schlatt still waits for Tommy's signal before bombarding him with affection. Tommy is grateful for it.

"Can I have a hug, Schlatt?" Tommy asks.

Schlatt is visibly relieved and takes two steps forward before he's sweeping Tommy up into his arms, off the ground and pulling him close. Tommy laughs breathlessly, holding on tight as Schlatt rocks them both back and forth.

"That's triple points for me in the Tommy laugh game- I'm calling it."

Tommy doesn't bother arguing, he just enjoys his hug and the little turtle that is tucked between them.

Tommy, Wilbur's noticed, sits all curled up into himself, wrapped up tight like someone will hurt him.

It's interesting to Wilbur, because even with how big they all are, it's their natural state to stretch out and lounge- with Schlatt leaning back in an armchair and Quackity laid out over the couch cushions- they're all so easy to relax and then there's Tommy, sitting on the rug next to Wilbur, cross-legged with his elbows on his knees and his palms under his chin.

"All the signs point to yes." George sighs.

"No!" Quackity argues. "No they actually don't!"

Wilbur grins, all cheek, very invested in this debate. "So far all that I've heard sounds pretty damning."

"That's because you're listening to Schlatt!" Quackity exclaims, throwing a hand out. Schlatt flips his hat backwards, which says all that is needed to say, really.

"What is that thing they say about broken clocks?" George raises an eyebrow.

"Hey! What the fuck!" Schlatt huffs. "I'm so much more than a broken clock, George!"

"Yeah, you're actually stupid."

"What the *fuck*, man?"

Wilbur looks to Techno, who is doing his best to tune out their nonsense as per usual. "Tech, what do you think? Do you think that Quackity and Sapnap have been sharing a bed this whole time or not?"

Techno scrolls some more on Twitter. "I'm not at liberty to say." He stops scrolling. Tilts his head. "Oh, Niki got a new dog."

"Techno, you can just agree with me and take my side and I'd be happy and grateful." Quackity says.

"Can I see the dog?" Wilbur asks. Techno leans over and shows Wilbur his screen. Niki's tweet a picture of a Dalmatian puppy. Even though Tommy didn't ask, Techno shows him too.

"Hey, that's the dog from one hundred and one dalmatians." He realizes.

"It is." Techno nods. "You like dogs, Tommy?"

Tommy doesn't answer.

"Cats are better." Schlatt speaks up. "They're cooler."

And they all expect Tommy to shrug again, not agreeing or disagreeing- just perfectly neutral, perfectly safe, but to their surprise, he shakes his head.

"I think...I think that dogs are. I like them. I've always wanted one."

Everyone stops still. Wilbur looks over and exchanges an excited glance with Schlatt.

Tommy clearly takes their silence to mean something else, because he looks up, startled. "I mean- I'm- I didn't-"

Schlatt does what he does best- starts talking. Loudly. "No, no, I guess that's valid. Dogs are pretty great. Cats are just better. We can disagree- that's alright."

"Sure," Wilbur says, taking Tommy's side even though cats are his favorite ever. "Sure Schlatt. Whatever you say."

Sapnap comes around the corner, a to-go box in his hand. "Hey, I know another word for cat-wanna know what it is?"

"Kitten," Techno cuts in smoothly, "where have you been?"

Sapnap settles down beside Quackity, practically shoves the to-go box in his hands. “Karl wanted to grab lunch. Q, you should've come. We got you some wings if you want them.”

Quackity flushes. “Me? I- why? No. I was...busy.” He finishes lamely.

“Oh.” Sapnap sounds disappointed. “Well. Next time then.”

George mouths across the room at Wilbur- *gay*. Wilbur nods. He hopes they sort it out soon- all three of them- the romantic tension is awful. Having Sapnap come to *him* for advice on them wooing Quackity will be Wilbur's final straw.

“I think dogs are the best too, Tommy.” Techno says suddenly, drawing the attention away from the sad, gay activities that were happening. God, Wilbur thinks, he's such a great team captain.

“Dog?” Sapnap asks- biting back a smile at the way Q subtly leans into his side. “Tommy, you like dogs?”

Hesitantly, with his eyes flickering to a quiet Schlatt, he nods. “I do.”

“Dude, Karl runs an animal shelter- he rescues dogs, cats- one time he even rescued a turtle I think. I could take you down there if you wanted? We'd love to have you.”

“Oh, I *love* Karl's shelter.” Wilbur exclaims.

Tommy relaxes a little, stretches, puts his legs out. Wilbur smiles. “That sounds fun. Can I?”

“You'd have to do something awful to keep Karl away. He loves you.”

“He does? We haven't- I don't-”

Quackity, half buried into Sapnap's side by now, speaks up. “We talk about you, *tesoro*. A bit. Well- a lot.”

“A lot.” Techno confirms. “We want everyone to love you as much as we do.”

Tommy looks starry-eyed, then leans over, smiling, completely relaxed now, Wilbur easily offers his side, letting Tommy curl there, and hide a little from the praise. Wilbur can't hide his smile- can't pretend he isn't glowing with joy- and when Schlatt looks over at him, Wilbur would say he looks jealous, if he didn't also look soft at seeing them together.

Techno, yet again being the best captain Wilbur's ever had, senses Tommy's quiet nature and casually changes the subject back. “So are you?”

Quackity flushes. Sapnap frowns. “Huh?”

George leans in, grinning sharply. “Do you two share a bed, or what?”

Sapnap shrugs easily. “Yeah.”

“No!” Quackity protests. “Well- no, I-”

Sapnap looks at him. “No?” He sounds almost hurt- Wilbur wants to laugh.

“We- well, it's just- I get cold. That's all.”

“I get cold too, let me borrow Sapnap, man.” Schlatt teases.

Tommy laughs a little, and he readjusts so his head in Wilbur's lap. To Wilbur's delight, he stretches out and hums happily, closing his eyes to listen to their banter. Wilbur, personally, one hundred percent understands the feeling- sometimes he wants to just bask in the existence of his team- in the existence of people that love him and love each other.

“No.” Quackity says blankly.

“What about me, Quackity? I get cold.” George asks.

“You deserve to be cold,” Quackity hisses.

Sapnap looks delighted at being coveted. In his excitement, he throws an arm around Quackity's shoulder and drags him to his side. The man melts a bit, red faced and glaring.

“Are they flirting?” Tommy asks quietly.

Wilbur responds, equally quiet. “Oh yeah, sunshine. It's *awful*.” He brushes a thumb over Tommy's cheeks. He wonders whether the boy would have sun freckles in the summer. Sunspot, he thinks. Glowing little light. “Can I play with your hair?”

“Hm?” Tommy cracks an eye open. “Sure?”

Wilbur cards his fingers through Tommy's golden hair, letting his nails carefully scratch at his scalp. Tommy sighs happily.

“Does that feel good?” Wilbur asks, chuckling lightly.

“Mhm.” A moment passes, in which the team keep teasing each other in the background, and Wilbur focuses most of his attention on rearranging the soft curls under his hands. Then Tommy's eyes open again, and Wilbur startles when he sees the tears in them.

“Tommy? Wha- are you alright?”

Tommy just smiles. “Yeah, I- I think these are...happy tears. I'm happy.”

Wilbur takes a relieved breath. “Oh. Good. Don't cry though- if Techno sees you crying, he'll be upset.”

Tommy hums, closing his eyes again, content. “No more crying.”

“No more crying,” Wilbur agrees. “Are you gonna fall asleep?”

Tommy nods, opening another eye. “Is that okay?”

“Of course, Tommy. How could I say no to the boy who can fall asleep anywhere?”

Tommy settles again. “Anywhere that you all are.”

When Tommy finishes his routines, and the crowds are applauding, and he's exhausted beyond belief, what he does is, he'll put his head down on the ice. He'll hide his face away from all the eyes that are watching him. Just a moment. That's all he gets.

He's so tired that he has to remind himself not to cry. He's being filmed. He's being watched. His *coach* is over there. Every second that he spends slumped over on camera is another second that his coach's image is being torn apart. Every second that Tommy looks vulnerable to others is another second of wasted time. He has an image to protect- he can't just cry.

He can't.

So he just breathes. And then he breathes and breathes and breathes some more. And then, when he can finally move without trembling, he pulls himself up and makes himself move, throwing a tight smile to the still cheering crowds.

Tommy finds that he loves holding hands with people.

More specifically, the team- his team, if he were to take the chance and call them that. He's never had such an abundance of hands reaching out for his own and he's never had the courage to just grab on whenever he likes, but he does now, and it's better than anything.

It starts with Quackity just holding his hand to warm his fingers, and then it just grows from there- Schlatt and Techno and Wilbur. And they all do it differently.

Come here kid, Schlatt will say, holding out a hand for Tommy to shyly meet with his own. His palms are never sweaty, and his grip never falters, never letting Tommy slip away. Tommy has a theory that Schlatt, for his loud and bullying nature, can't verbalize his love, and lets his hands do the talking for him.

It's the way he taps his fingers against the backs of Tommy's hands, rubs a thumb along his knuckles, squeezes whenever he wants to make a point.

He talks through touch, and Tommy wants to listen always.

Wilbur likes to lace their fingers together, interlocking them, almost like he wants something to tie them together for real. He likes to trace Tommy's palms and play with his fingers and spends time studying his hands like they're something mesmerizing.

Everything feels loving when Wilbur does it- gentle and soft the way that Tommy could only ever wish for.

Techno holds Tommy's hands like he just wants to hide them away from the world. He takes Tommy's hand whenever he's afraid, when he's leading him somewhere- the touch is always guiding but not coddling.

Sometimes, if Tommy is panicking, Techno will take Tommy's shaking hands and press his fingers to his pulse, talking calmly until it slowly eases. It's very secure, when his hand is in Techno's- everything in the world seems solvable and easy.

Nothing can touch him when they're holding his hands.

And then, the media gets involved.

George finds Tommy in the back of the dance studio.

He's not dancing, he's just sitting and looking down at the mat, clearly lost in thought. George feels tension leave him, seeing Tommy sitting there unharmed, but then he sighs, because the kid looks distressed.

"Tommy?"

Tommy looks up, surprised. "George. Oh- hi. I was just- uh- thinking."

George is pleased to not hear him apologize, at least. "Can I sit?" Tommy nods. George sits down next to him, crossing his legs just as Tommy is. To his shock, Tommy immediately tips over and leans against him. So comfortable and so easy. So trusting. It takes George a moment to remember how to speak. "So what's going on? Wilbur's been looking for you."

"I know. I just- needed to think a little. Away from everyone."

"Everyone?"

"Not you guys, I guess. Everyone...else."

George understands. When they first joined the world stage and even a little before that, he was always secretly psyched out by the crowds and the fans and anything that wasn't just him playing the sport. The interviews and the parties and social media. Everyone who just *has* to have an opinion on you all the time. It unnerves him how people see you however they wanted and you couldn't do anything to change that except win.

"What are people saying?" He asks, already tired on Tommy's behalf.

Tommy sighs. "It's stupid."

"No it isn't."

"You'll think it is."

"I can promise you I won't."

Tommy squints at him suspiciously. "Okay well. There are people who- I don't know. I guess they've seen pictures or videos of me and- and you guys and they think-" He stops himself, biting his lip.

"What do they think, Tommy?"

"They think I'm- childish. They think that I'm not- that I shouldn't be so close with you guys."

George doesn't speak, only because he physically can't less he starts spitting *fire* .

"My coach said this would happen. He said that if I act like a kid then I'll be treated like one. That I'll be underestimated and made fun of and-" Tommy swallows. "I'm not supposed to be like that. I'm supposed to be...perfect."

"Tommy." George finally manages. He just- he needs Tommy to stop. He can't listen to this anymore. "Tommy, no one is perfect. And if you've forgotten, you *are* a kid. You're only seventeen and you've done all this already."

"It doesn't feel like enough."

"Maybe not. Maybe not right now, but trust me- to an outsider looking in? An outsider that *knows* you? None of what they say matters."

"So you don't think that I'm being stupid?" He asks.

"Tommy," George says slowly. "When I was a kid, people made fun of me a lot."

"What? You- really? *You* ?"

"Yeah. I loved to dance. I liked music. I collected rocks. I was- different. People didn't like that about me. You know, I wanted to figure skate when I was small."

"Really?" And Tommy sounds enthralled, like a kid tucked into bed, ready to hear a story.

"Yes. I liked skating and liked watching figure skaters so I thought I could try it- unfortunately, not everyone *liked* that I enjoyed it."

Tommy frowns. "They made fun of you for it."

"They did."

His frown deepens. "You don't skate now."

"I don't. And I'm not unhappy now, I love hockey. I love my team. I love where I am. But I can't help thinking about what would've happened if I didn't give up because of what other people who didn't really matter thought. I'll never know."

"Oh."

"Tommy, if we make you happy- which I hope is the case- then you shouldn't let anyone take that away from you. Let the world say what it will, let them think what they want- if you're comfortable and safe, then you don't let them take that from you." George says firmly.

Tommy moves off of George, his brows furrowing. He thinks for a moment.

George stands, giving him that space. He can recognize someone that wants to be alone to process. Before he goes though, he turns back and says, "If you're still unsure, you should ask one of them about it. Ask them what they think. I'm sure they'll tell you what you want to hear."

Tommy finds Sapnap, because Sapnap always, always, speaks his mind. If Tommy asks him a question, he's getting nothing but the truth.

"Sapnap? Can I ask you a question?"

Sapnap, who's practicing maneuvering with his stick, stops and looks up. "Yeah, what's up? You alright?"

Tommy nods, he folds his hands in his lap. "I was just wondering. The- uh- the hand holding. George told me I should ask you about it?"

Sapnap leans against the rink edge. It's a silent prompt for Tommy to keep talking.

"You watch the interviews and- and you see what people say. About me. About us." Sapnap's expression hardens a bit. "What do you think?"

"What do I think?" He repeats.

Tommy nods.

"About what they say about us?"

Tommy nods again.

Sapnap scoffs. "I don't give a *fuck* what they have to say. Not a single one. They're not us. You're happy. We're happy- and Tommy, trust me, we're *very* happy when you're happy- then everything is all good."

"But it's childish. I'm ruining your image."

Sapnap pauses, then comes over to the gate, off the ice, and kneels in front of Tommy. He puts out his hand. Tommy stares at it for a second, then carefully lays his own hand against Sapnap's palm.

"Tommy, you know how I feel about figure skating."

Tommy winces. but Sapnap brushes a thumb over Tommy's skin, relaxing him.

"The sport is beautiful." He says. "The things that you can do? Fucking insane, man. But everything else? The way they judge you, the way they put you up on a pedestal, the way they expect perfection? Fuck that. Fuck them. You're not allowed to hold hands with people you love now?"

"I'm an ice skater." Tommy says, even though it makes him feel sick to argue why he shouldn't be loved. "I'm-"

"Yeah? So you're not allowed to be loved? I hold my teammate's hands all the time." Sapnap rolls his eyes. "They say what the hell they're gonna say- I've never cared."

"Really?"

"Really. If those motherfuckers up in the ice skating world don't like us holding hands, then that's yet another way I'll be sticking it to the people who let you suffer all those years." He softens. "And, I'll get to hold you. It's a win-win in my book, firefly."

Sapnap squeezes his hand. Tommy nearly cries.

"You need gloves." Wilbur says. "You need them. You can't go anywhere without them. It's *freezing*, Tommy."

Tommy doesn't bother protesting as he stands outside the door, waiting to go out with the lot of them. Phil is treating them all to dinner, and there's a place not even an eight minute walk away from here that they all want to go to. The hockey players, all of a sudden, are so pressed about the temperature.

"Does anyone have a scarf?" Quackity asks. "Tommy, don't you have one?"

Tommy shakes his head, amused.

Schlatt turns away from the glass door. "The kid doesn't even have boots- it's snowing out there. The next thing we're doing is going shopping and getting you some real shoes."

Sapnap takes off his scarf and carefully wraps it around Tommy's neck. Tommy's eyes widen. "Sapnap, you don't need to-"

"I know, I know. I want to keep you warm. Besides, Q will just be clinging to me anyway. I'll be warm enough for the both of us."

Tommy tucks the scarf around himself. "Oh. Thank you."

They keep fluttering around him until Phil shows up- giving him mittens and scarves and hats. They want him warm and safe and happy, even for just the eight minute walk down to eat. They wouldn't let him suffer for even a second if they could help it.

It's very amusing to him because he's not even cold. He's a winter olympian. He used to, as a kid, sneak out in the middle of the night and head down to the park's frozen over pond with his best friend Eryn. He's used to the cold and the cold is used to him.

But he won't deny the fact that he likes the attention. He likes them coddling him and worrying about him. He likes the fact that they want to bundle him up in them. He's never had someone want him warm so badly.

Eventually Phil pushes them to start walking, just so they manage to actually leave. The walk is okay. As they're leaving out of the village, there's photographers, so Tommy straightens and keeps his eyes forward, remembering to project confidence and distance.

He doesn't give in when Wilbur starts lightly teasing Quackity, he doesn't give in when Schlatt poses a question about the best kind of cracker. He keeps himself in check.

Then-

"Tommy. You can relax."

Tommy blinks, then his eyes automatically cut to the side, looking for the camera, but all he can see is Sapnap. He looks to the other side and there's only George and Wilbur. Behind him is Techno and in front are Phil and Schlatt. They've surrounded him. They're flanking him to keep him out of view of the camera lens. They've done more than just bundle him up in their clothes, they've covered for him here too.

"Is- are you sure you-"

George nods. "Mhm. I'm sure. Let them say what they want. They shouldn't make you live two lives when there's clearly one that makes you happier."

And with that, Tommy can relax. He's still quiet and nervous, but he doesn't tuck himself away behind that icy persona- he laughs at Schlatt's ramblings, he bumps shoulders with Quackity, he preens when Sapnap ruffles his hair. And when they stop at a crosswalk, and Wilbur turns to him, Tommy smiles.

Wilbur looks thrown off for a moment- overwhelmed with love. Then he suddenly asks, "are your cheeks cold? I think your cheeks are cold."

"Wilbur, I-"

Wilbur reaches forward and cups Tommy's face in his palms. Tommy inhales sharply.

"Oh." Tommy closes his eyes, melting into the warmth. "Oh."

It's an insane thing to ask, and an insane thing to let happen, but the touch is so very easy to accept. This affection, the teasing, not too serious, offered even for a fake reason, kind-of affection is easy to let happen. And he knows good and well how often Wilbur gets overwhelmed by his own love. It feels insane to say, but Tommy knows he gets overtaken by his love for *Tommy*.

"What is happening, Wilbur?" George asks. His eyes are on the camera still snapping pictures of them, probably thinking of all that would probably be said about them- all that *Tommy* will be reading.

"His cheeks are cold." Wilbur whines.

Tommy doesn't even argue, he's basically purring. He finds that he doesn't care so much when he's right here- putty in their hands. Let whoever say whatever. These guys are *his*.

George's eyes flicker over Tommy's expression, then over Wilbur's. "... alright, fine."

"Come on Wil!" Phil calls. "Let Tommy go! One more cross and we're warm!"

"You're asking a lot of me, Phil!" Then his voice quiets, becoming intimate, his thumbs brushing against Tommy's cheeks. "How am I supposed to let you go, hm?"

Tommy reaches up and curls his own hands around Wilbur's wrists. He squeezes once, lingering, and then gently pulls Wilbur's hands away from his cheeks. Wilbur looks disappointed but doesn't protest. He cheers up though when Tommy links their gloved fingers together.

Let the world see that Tommy loves these guys- who cares? His love is anything but a weakness.

Tommy, and he knows that this is bad, has grown to be almost proud of himself for how good he is at hiding his emotions.

He shouldn't be. He shouldn't. But he can't help it. That was the one thing his coach said he was good at- especially on the ice- performing, giving a good show. He was always praised for his composure. He never let his mask slip.

He's always *always* picture perfect for the people that are looking, because he knows if they truly knew how ruined he was, then they wouldn't want him.

He could win and win and win, but if he looked as broken as he feels? No one would cheer and no one would watch.

And he knows, distantly, that he's destroying his chances at being saved by being so good at it. He knows that if he let just a single second slip, someone might ask him, *hey, are you okay?* And they might even mean it.

But that's a chance that he can't take. so he gives the show that people are expecting, and he never ever slips up.

That is, until he's alone in a dance studio during the pre-training for the Olympics.

That is, until Wilbur pokes his head through the door and instead of turning and walking away, he invites himself in.

That is, until Tommy realized he was surrounded by people who actually *wanted* him without that carefully crafted mask on.

He'll admit- at first when he wakes up and feels completely disconnected from his body, as if he's never felt the sun for ages- he's prepared to do what he always does.

He's ready to pretend that nothing is wrong and make sure that no one else can see how severely screwed up he is.

His coach didn't let him have rest days or breaks or time off. And he was made to understand that it was because if he was having a bad day during an event, he'd have to suck it up there too- medals don't rest. But selfishly, he burrows back into the covers and resists the urge to sob.

He just- he just feels bad. He feels awful.

It's almost as if there's something inside of his lungs turning all the air freezing cold, and taking his voice from him. It creeps down his insides and makes him want to just curl up as tight as he can- tight enough so that no one would see him if they looked.

It's a paralyzing sort of pain, and the way that it hurts makes him think there won't ever be a way for it to be healed. Of course, logically, he knows that's ludicrous, but still.

He thinks that he should curl up and stay out of sight - there's nothing pretty about him right now. Especially not right now. But then he hears a voice, Wilbur probably, or Phil, *if you ever feel bad, you can come to me and I'll take care of you- we'll take care of you. No questions asked.* Tommy nodded when he was told, because it sounded great, but he didn't actually think of it as the truth.

Maybe it could be.

He pulls himself up off the bed, dragging Quackity's blanket with him. Getting dressed seems like a hassle so he just grabs whatever hoodie and sweatpants he can find- which he's pretty sure are some he borrowed from Sapnap way back when.

He trudges out of his room and goes to find Quackity.

Quackity has a way of making it okay for Tommy to disappear. It sounds- bad, but Quackity is talkative and loud, just enough so that when Tommy feels like speaking takes all his effort, he can just let Quackity do most of the talking for him. Tommy can just settle in at Quackity's side, with no need to force himself to try.

He finds Quackity and Schlatt sitting together over a plate of waffles and eggs. They're talking quietly and they both look a little tired, but when they see Tommy, their faces light up.

"Tommy! Hey, good morning!"

Tommy doesn't respond, instead sliding into the booth at Schlatt's side. Quackity's smile dims- his eye catches on the blanket and the sweats and maybe even the look in Tommy's eyes. Hallowed out and dark. He comes to the right conclusion pretty quickly.

When Quackity speaks again, it's quieter- much softer than before. "Hey, *mi ter* - uh, Tommy, let me tell you about the time that my mother met this team, yeah?"

Tommy nods slowly, and Quackity starts talking about how nervous Sapnap, Wilbur and even Techno were and how excited he was- how his mother cooked for them all and gave them seconds upon seconds, very used to feeding a hockey player herself.

Tommy sinks back, letting Quackity's voice wash over him, letting it ease some of the despair in his heart.

Schlatt stays quiet next to him, listening to Quackity, but at some point he reaches over and curls a rough palm over Tommy's delicate fingers. The touch is grounding, bringing Tommy out of the daze he wants to lay back into.

Schlatt doesn't talk. He just holds on, somehow knowing that Tommy desperately needs that.

And just for a moment, with Quackity talking soothingly and Schlatt holding his hand steadily, Tommy can imagine that things aren't bad. That maybe, for once, his bad day won't last a lifetime. Schlatt doesn't let go of Tommy's hand, even when more of his team come down- Wilbur among them. The man only needs to take one look at Tommy to know that something is wrong.

He comes around the table and kneels down in front of Tommy, eyes alight with worry.

"Bad day, sunshine?"

Tommy flinches a little and Wilbur sucks in a breath.

"Sorry, sorry- bad day, Tommy?"

Tommy takes a moment and then nods. Because it's a hard-to-feel, hard-to-be-honest kind of day. Hard to be himself the way they've helped him.

"That's okay. We all have them. I'm glad that you came to us." Then, to Tommy's shock, he takes Tommy's hand that isn't being held and carefully presses his lips to the back of it. "Take all the time you need to come back to me, Tommy. You know I'd wait for you. We all will."

Tommy whimpers slightly, then leans over, pressing his face into Wilbur's hair. He feels terribly clingy. He feels terribly needy. He hopes that it's okay.

He goes through the day with them, holding Schlatt's hand and drifting around, not tired enough to sleep, too tired to speak.

He rests though- Techno reads him some poetry, he and George watch a movie, Sapnap shows him how to make an everything-but-the-kitchen-sink dessert. It's ungodly amounts of chocolate, and Sapnap promises that he'll make it again when Tommy feels real enough to actually taste it.

Slowly but surely, Tommy finds himself looking forward to tomorrow.

By the end of the day, though, Tommy still feels cold, and he can tell that they're all getting restless. Techno and Schlatt especially, as Techno's knee keeps bouncing like it physically

pains him that he can't take away whatever pain is plaguing Tommy. Schlatt's hold on Tommy's hand just gets tighter- and Tommy can almost feel the desperation there.

In the middle of Quackity switching to the next movie and Sapnap going to get them some snacks, Schlatt leans down, voice low.

"I need you, kid." He begs. "I need you. So don't stop fighting, alright? That bastard didn't break you."

Tommy's eyes slide closed. Sometimes it feels like he did. Sometimes it feels like he's ruined.

Schlatt knows him well enough by now to hear the things that Tommy isn't saying. "He did not, Tommy. You hear me? I'm not good at this," he admits. "This talking shit, but listen: none of these people are worth you. Not him. Not any of the ones who think they know you. To be honest, not even us. But still, come back to us- *please*. We don't deserve you, but damn if we don't love you."

Tommy leans over, presses his face into Schlatt's shoulder. He sighs silently. He can feel Schlatt lean over. There's a feather-light pressure at his temple, and Tommy wants to sob. He's being treated so nicely- so carefully, like he's precious.

"Alright," Quackity claps. "Beauty and the beast, yes?"

Schlatt nods for him, and Tommy just keeps his face pressed away, turned away from the light.

He used to spend a lot of time with his coach.

His coach was his traveling companion- his guardian, his advisor, his friend. At least, he was the closest thing that Tommy *thought* he had to a friend.

They went everywhere together, had meals together, practiced together. Tommy even remembers a few times- way, way, back before- when he could make his coach laugh. Tommy remembers how accomplished he'd feel to hear it. There were good times. There were. Tommy knows it.

Tommy just...ruined it.

He messed it up somewhere, pulling away and asking too much and being too clingy to the people that didn't want what was best for him. And here he is still, clinging again. His coach was the only one who wanted him, and now these guys...now Tommy is making them stick around for no reason. He's making them treat him like he's precious when he *knows* he isn't.

He feels the sudden, unbearable urge to apologize. For what, he's not entirely sure. The way he's sitting tucked into Schlatt's side, the way he's burdening them, taking up their space and time and making them worry for no reason.

The door swings open and Sapnap, with his arms full of snacks, comes inside. He's grinning. "I've come back from the hunt. The place is cleaned out of anything that looks even remotely

unhealthy. Or anything blueberry flavored. I know you like that, Tommy."

And that throws Tommy a little.

He does like blueberries. It's his favorite flavor after strawberry. But he's never *said* that. He's never told them that he'd rather have the blue smoothies from the juice bar, or that he catches himself looking longingly at the pastries that he still can't bring himself to ask for. He's said that he liked it when they watched him try it, but-

Sapnap was paying attention. Sapnap was more than just paying attention.

Tommy's coach said he was the only one who would want him if he wasn't winning. But here he is, not having skated properly in weeks, and they're still here. They care about his favorite flavor of sweets and don't mind that he can't bring himself to speak. They still surround him like he's something worth being around, like he's something worth protecting.

They want him. With, as it seems, no conditions.

"Throw me a twinkie," Schlatt says.

Sapnap drops Doritos on Quackity's lap and curls his arms around his Twinkies. "Fuck you, these are all for me."

"You have *three* ."

"I know how to count."

"Wait," Quackity looks down at the remote in his hand. "I think I restarted the previews- how do you-"

"Press rewind." Wilbur says.

"You can't rewind previews, Wilbur," George swipes some white cheddar cheese curls. "They make you rewatch the ads more than once. You can't skip through them."

"Sapnap, you can spare one twinkie." Techno sighs. He sounds like he's worked seven jobs and is still not making enough money. "Like, one."

"Tech, okay, sure. I *could* spare one. I could. but Tech, imagine that I actually can't."

"Imagine that I make you do extra reps tomorrow in the gym. Imagine that."

"Schlatt," Sapnap exclaims suddenly, "take this twinkie from me before I throw it at your head."

"Well, look," Wilbur leans over to study the remote with Quackity. "I don't want to watch them tell me about the magic of disney. I want to actually see the magic of disney."

"This is a literal remote, Wil." Quackity complains. "Like, I feel ancient holding it. Why isn't everything touch screen?"

"Diseases." George says simply. "There are diseases out there."

Schlatt catches the twinkle that Sapnap tosses him and pauses for a moment, trying to figure out how to open it with one hand, just so he doesn't have to let go of Tommy's hand. That, ultimately, is what makes him speak up.

"My coach and I," Tommy whispers, throat aching. Schlatt startles so badly he nearly drops his twinkie. "We weren't...friends. Were we?"

They all go quiet, shocked to hear Tommy's voice, as quiet as it is. Shocked to hear Tommy's question, as obvious as it might be.

"Well, what do you think?" Techno asks patiently, the least thrown off by Tommy's sudden inquiry.

"I don't think we were." Tommy says slowly. "He...hurt me. He scared me. You guys don't do that."

"We don't." Techno nods. "And no one should. And hopefully, no one ever will again."

"There was a practice that we saw," Wilbur says suddenly. His gaze off to the side, distant as he remembers. "You two must've run over your time and so- we were waiting."

Vaguely, Tommy remembers what he's talking about. But back then was more of a blur than Tommy likes to remember. He kept himself distant to keep himself safe, so before they truly came around and woke him up, everything was like a haze.

"God, I'll never forget the way he had you doing rep after rep. Like none of them would ever be good enough- like you weren't already doing a good job. And the things he was saying-" Wilbur's voice catches in his throat, stopping him from speaking. Tommy feels awful. "But after I bet you didn't even remember it, did you? It was just another day for you."

Tommy nods.

"People like that *want* to make us think they're our friend. They make you think that they care and they're the *only* people who care, and so you feel like you have to stay." Wilbur snuffles. "Tommy, some of the stuff that he said and did will seem normal to you for a while. But that doesn't mean it was right. And soon it won't be your normal anymore."

"We don't want to control you," Techno says firmly, "or make you do things for us. We just want to see you happy."

"Like friends do." Tommy says slowly, thinking of Ranboo and Tubbo's hands on his cheeks, of Quackity's photos in his wallet, of Sapnap's proud grin when showing Tommy off. "Like Ranboo and Tubbo. Like Niki and Jack."

Techno nods, but Sapnap's nose wrinkles. "Please don't compare me to Jack Manifold." He says. George smacks his arm, making him wince. " *What?* "

Tommy feels like he's been righted again. Like he was sideways for so long and now he's finally been turned. The world in front of him makes proper sense now. The team are not friends with him the way that his coach was- his coach wasn't even his friend. Not ever.

"We weren't friends." Tommy says to himself. "Ever." A reminder. A mantra.

No one disagrees with him, or is upset with him for pointing it out- Tommy even sees Sapnap nodding viciously to Tommy, agreeing. Schlatt squeezes his hand, and Tommy, feeling like all the ice in his lungs is melting, finally squeezes back.

"Come with me." Wilbur says one morning. He just knocks on Tommy's door, all bundled up like he's ready to go outside, and asks Tommy to come along. "Please? Go put a coat on."

Tommy blinks at him, then goes and grabs a coat, hoping he'll wake up further on the way there. He follows, letting Wilbur lead him to the elevators and then out the doors. They flash their badges to leave- mainly just them waving at Charlie, who looks like he's trying to shove as many marshmallows into his mouth at once as Ted cheers him on- and Wilbur pulls out his phone. He calls an uber, and when it comes, Tommy crawls in, holding back his questions.

He trusts Wilbur- he trusts him a lot more than most- but Tommy did kind of want to know where they were going. When they get out, they're at an outlet mall.

"Wil." Tommy says. "Wilbur." He tugs at Wilbur's coat. He briefly worries that he's being annoying, but Wilbur just looks over with a sunny smile. "Wil, where are we going?"

"Well, I need new socks." He says simply. "New, *cool* socks. I get a pair from every place that we go to when we travel."

"Oh." That's cool, Tommy thinks. He doesn't think he has anything from all the places he's ever been. Medals and event results, he guesses. "Why did you want me with you?"

Wilbur stops short, nearly making Tommy bump into his back. "What do you mean?" He asks, genuinely confused. "I like to spend time with you. I *love* to spend time with you." Then he pauses, brows furrowing like he's worried. "Wait, we can go back if you didn't want to come- I should've asked before I just-"

"No!" Tommy exclaims. Wilbur stops. "No, I love, uh, I love spending time with you too."

Wilbur beams.

"New socks?" Tommy prompts, nudging Wilbur lightly so he doesn't just do that thing where he stands and stares at Tommy.

"Yes!" Wilbur exclaims, "yeah, let's go-"

He leads Tommy into this huge complex mall, going on and on about how he *needs* socks with dogs on them, that he's got ducks and ferrets and butterflies, but Rae has some with corgis that are the *cutest*. Tommy listens, enraptured, and Wilbur bumps the back of their hands together and smoothly grabs hold of Tommy's hand.

They go into a couple of stores, booing lightly to themselves when they only see normal, boring patterned socks in colors like navy blue and black. When they finally find a store with what they want, Wilbur is glowing, looking up at the wall of colorful socks like he's found God.

Tommy bites back a laugh as he tries to decide between chocolate labs or poodles. He gets them both, and gets a pair with kittens on them.

"Why don't you pick a pair, Tommy?"

Tommy startles slightly. "Of socks?"

"Yeah. Go on. Which ones do you like?"

Tommy looks at them all- the pink ones with octopi on them, the green dinosaurs, the ones patterned with food like cheeseburgers and carrots and lollipops. His eyes catch on some- they're light blue with polar bears. They're cute, but when Tommy looks at them, he can't help thinking of his coach. Of pale-blue sweaters and iron pressed pleats.

"I don't know," he says helplessly. He feels achingly frustrated- it's so easy for other people to make a choice. It's so easy for other people to just know what they like and what they dislike. Why is it so hard for him to do the same?

"That's alright, Tommy." Wilbur says softly. "That's okay."

Tommy looks at him, something almost like frustration building inside of him. "How is it okay? I can't just pick something to like. I'm-" His thin anger breaks, leaving him feeling hopeless. "Something is *wrong* with me, Wilbur."

Wilbur looks at him for a moment, eyes terribly haunted, then he looks to the side. "I used to feel the way that you do."

"What?"

"Yeah. My coach, before Phil, my old team even, were not the nicest people. They told me what I should do- what I was expected to do- and I never questioned them. I never thought there was better out there for me until someone came and showed me."

"Techno?"

"Yeah. And Phil. And George and Schlatt and Quackity. All of them. They all saved me. And they keep doing it everyday. They're the ones that taught me that being myself was no grounds for someone to hurt me." He says. "The same goes for you, Tommy. You should be allowed to be yourself. Any clothing you pick should be about you and only you. Don't think about what anyone else would want other than you. What catches your eye? What makes you smile?"

Tommy casts his eyes back over the options, all the animals and colors and icons. He stops when he sees one. They're red and patterned with little grey wolves. He used to love wolves.

When he was a kid, back when they were friends first and ice skaters second, him and Eryn would hang out and pretend to be them out on the ice. Chasing after one another like they had no worries in the world. It was breathless fun and Tommy remembered feeling completely tired out after- but in a good way. Collapsing into a pile once they were off the ice, but immediately wanting to get back on.

The memory makes him smile, the little wolf patterns make him smile, the red color background- his favorite- makes him smile.

He reaches out for them, then turns to Wilbur.

"Those are great-" he says, smiling at Tommy like he's proud. "Wolves are just big dogs, anyway. With uh- murderous tendencies."

Tommy laughs, then when Wilbur turns to go up and pay, Tommy lingers to grab the polar bear socks. He's not going to let his coach ruin something for him- not anymore.

"I just don't get this game." Ranboo announces, loud so he can be heard over the cheering crowd behind them. "I think it's too fast."

Tubbo rolls his eyes. "They hit the little black circle into the nets with sticks. Ran, you regularly talk about backside triple cork 1440s- this is genuinely just hitting stuff until you get what you want."

"I don't get it."

Tommy, in between them, waves his little flag and grins. He loves coming to the hockey matches. He loves putting on a jersey with one of their numbers on it and sitting in the stands to watch them all play. He especially loves coming with all his friends- it's one of his favorite things to do besides skating.

"Oh lord," Ranboo remarks. "I think Schlatt just killed that guy."

Tubbo leans forward. Squints. "Wait, you might be right."

Schlatt skates by, then doubles back, stopping in front of the three of them and leaning up against the rink edge. Even through his helmet, Tommy can see his smug grin.

"See that, Tommy? I'm the coolest, aren't I?"

"Did you just murder someone?" Ranboo asks.

"Hell yeah I did!"

Ranboo leans back, then whispers out of the side of his mouth. "Tubbo, call the police."

"That was so cool," Tommy says, just to see the way that Schlatt preens. And preen he does. A whistle blows and Wilbur skates over, smacking him with his stick.

"We are literally in the middle of a match-" he huffs, then spares a smile at Tommy. "-hi Tommy- get your head into the game, Schlatt."

"Okay Troy Bolton," Schlatt huffs, "sheesh, let me say hi to the kid."

Wilbur tries to look annoyed, but it doesn't work with the way he softens subtly. "Yeah, yeah."

"Hi Tommy." He says pointedly. Tommy raises an eyebrow. "Cheer for me, yeah?"

"The team." Wilbur corrects.

"Me."

Tommy laughs, then waves his flag. "I'm cheering. I am."

"For the team."

"He's wearing my number," Schlatt points out.

"Shut up."

The whistle blows again and Wilbur just resorts to tugging Schlatt away. "Hey!" Tubbo yells at their retreating forms. "Do that again, Schlatt!"

Schlatt throws up a thumbs up. "You got it Tubs!"

Then, Rae clambers down in front of them, popcorn in her hands. "What did I miss? Oh shit- two goals? How did I miss two goals in five minutes?"

"This game is too fast." Ranboo says miserably.

"This game is boring." Qt announces, shaking a package of sour patch kids. She leans over and shakes a few into Tubbo's open, expecting hand. "They're crushing this team. They need to play us. Make it interesting."

"You guys would win." Tommy remarks.

Qt points at him. "You, Tommy, are the smartest person alive. And I mean that. Here, have some sour patch kids."

Tommy cups his hands. At first, the woman intimidated Tommy, with her height and her proud nature, but she reminds Tommy a lot of a really nice bear. Tommy likes her a lot.

Poki sits down next to Rae and steals some of her popcorn. "They didn't have any chocolate covered raises, what am I supposed to do now?"

"Not eat those, what the heck?" Rae's nose wrinkles. "Please, have taste."

Poki sticks her tongue out at her friend then turns to Tommy, who's busy giving Tubbo half the sour patch kids that Qt poured into his hands. "The announcers are talking about how

you're their moral support teammate again, Tommy."

Tommy frowns.

"Why do you say the announcers as if we all don't know you just mean Toast. He's insane." Rae huffs. "Toms, if it makes you uncomfortable, I can go right up to that box and tell Toast to shut up- he listens to me, I'll do it."

"You're friends with the hockey announcer?" Qt gapes. "Fuck, no wonder you get the best highlights."

"Tommy?" Poki prompts.

"Um," he thinks for a moment. He doesn't care so much about what people have to say. Well, he does, but he's trying not to. "No, that's okay. I - I don't mind. I think I like it. I like being their- what was it?"

"Emotional support teammate." She fills in.

"Yeah." Tommy pops a sour patch kid into his mouth. On the rink, Schlatt tackles the hell out of someone and then points over at Tubbo, an insane grin on his face. "I'm their emotional support teammate. I'm on their team."

It helps, sometimes, to know that Tommy isn't the only one to have bad days.

Wilbur too, goes quiet. Wilbur too, ducks his head. Wilbur too, pulls away from love that is readily given. Sometimes he, like Tommy, slips back into the mindset that he only matters because of the things that he does. And sometimes his team's words just aren't enough to reassure him.

Tommy finds him sitting in a hallway, knees pulled up to his chest, hiding away from them. He's been missing all day, and Tommy, who knows what it's like to need to be alone, didn't *try* to find him, but now he can't ignore the man in front of him.

"Wilbur?" He goes softly. Wilbur looks up. His eyes are red-rimmed. "Can I sit?"

Wilbur nods. Tommy sits next to him. It's quiet for a moment.

"You're avoiding them." Tommy notes.

Wilbur sighs. "Not on purpose, but- I mean, God, why won't they just leave me be?"

It takes Tommy a moment to think- he thinks the same way when he is having a bad day. Why couldn't they just leave him there? Why couldn't *Wilbur* just leave him alone?

Now, Tommy knows the answer.

"They love us too much to let us hurt ourselves, Wil. You taught me that."

Wilbur looks over, eyes shiny again, expression full of emotion that Tommy can't place.

"Would you?" Tommy asks, already knowing the answer.

"Would I what?"

"Would you leave me?"

"No." Wilbur says instantly, then he seems to realize Tommy's point, because he sighs tiredly.

"No, I wouldn't."

"Then there." He hesitates, then leans over, laying his head on Wilbur's shoulder. Wilbur chuckles sadly.

"When did you get so wise, Tommy?" He leans over, laying his head on top of Tommy's.

"I love you, Wilbur." He says quietly. "And they love you too. They're worried."

"I know. I know, I just need-"

"Space. I could go, if-"

"Not from you." He turns, buries his face in Tommy's hair, and takes a breath. "Thank you for coming to find me."

"You found me first." Tommy says easily. "I was just returning the favor."

The bad day passes, like all of them do.

This is Tommy, Wilbur says, a glowing smile on his face. Tommy waves a little at Karl, who looks over the moon to be meeting someone Sapnap's talked so much about. *Tommy, my best friend.*

"Hello, Tommy- Wilbur's best friend," Karl greets. "I'm Karl. Nice to meet you. Are you ready to meet these puppies?"

Tommy nods furiously. He feels giddy. "Yes. Yes, please."

"Alrighty, follow me and prepare for an afternoon of only good things!"

Tommy follows, more than prepared for his good things. Only good things now. No more tears.

He thinks that he deserves it.

End Notes

wow ^-^ that was a lot of fun!! there was honestly a LOT that I deleted from this, that plant is trying to make me write into a little slice-of-life thing. girl, we'll see, who knows. leave a comment if you enjoyed!!

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!